

Jimmie Davis : An Interview

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James Houston Davis Known as “Jimmie Davis” was Governor of Louisiana State two times, firstly in the mid-1940’s and secondly in the early 1960’s. In musical terms he owes his fame to his well-known song, “You Are My Sunshine”. He has been a singer of country music for an unprecedentedly long time ; he started recording in 1928 only six years after the release of the first two phonograph records of what was later to be called “hillbilly music”, a designation that preceded others including the contemporary “country music”.

I wrote to Jimmie Davis in July, 1983, uncertain if he was still alive or not, when I thought of writing a biography, at the address I located in the who’s who section of *The History of Gospel Music* written by Jesse Burt and Duane Allen and published by K & S Press in Nashville in 1971. His secretary answered me, saying that Davis would grant my request to interview him in late August and that there would be an opportunity to attend his gospel concert in Baton Rouge on the day before the three consecutive days he would keep for my interview. Surprising was the fact that he was still musically active in his early eighties as well as the fact that he was still alive. I flew to New Orleans after doing some preparatory research at Country Music Foundation in Nashville, and drove to Baton Rouge to attend “An Evening of Gospel Music” by Jimmie Davis at the First Baptist Church before beginning to interview him the next morning. The length of each interview session was moderated by reservations I had due to his age, the first session being for an hour, the second for an hour and a quarter and the the third for an hour.

The main source of my biographical knowledge about Davis before I left Japan was a six-page biography of him in Chet Hagan’s *Country Music Legends in the Hall of Fame* (Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, 1972), which I found, later in Nashville, fairly owes to Gordon Bellcase’s unpublished article in manuscript, “Governors’ Mansions, Halls of Fame, and Streets of Gold : A Biography of Jimmie Davis” (1975), a photostat copy of which is kept in Country Music Foundation in Nashville. Then I found out, in Baton Rouge, there already existed a book-length biography of Davis

titled *You Are My Sunshine : The Jimmie Davis Story* (1977) by Gus Weil ; I found this utterly uncritical biography among the songbooks and records sold to the audience of the concert I mentioned above. The biographical questions in my interview were largely based on the information I obtained mostly from these sources and I tried to learn more details about the incidents and episodes they gave as well as to confirm the facts and also to corroborate Jimmie Davis's own "rags to riches" image. My later research on his biography through other sources naturally makes me realize how limited my questions were, but, at any rate, this seems to be the longest interview Davis has ever given, as he admitted himself. (It is possible that Gus Weil, another resident of Baton Rouge, had more contact with Davis, judging from the kind of book he wrote, even though it is not substantially long.) I believe this interview will make a good contribution to the studies of the history of Southern white music and of Southern politics. It also casts light on the relationship between politics and popular songs or the politics of musical popularity.

Many newspapers and magazine articles that have been written about him have been partly based on what appear to be relatively short interviews. Even feature articles don't give the impression of being based on lengthy talks with him. Also less extensive seems to have been the new interview conducted by Peter Mikelbank, soon after my own interview, for his fairly affectionate article for *The Journal of Country Music*, Volume X, No. 3 (1985), titled "Places in the Sun: The Many Splendored Careers of Jimmie Davis". My questions also focus more on his musical side and draw from him information concerning such subjects as how he "composed" "You Are My Sunshine", his early recording career, and his brief association with Elvis Presley, among others. I find especially interesting his apparently excusatory talk about his unsuccessful recording of "You Are My Sunshine" he alleged to have done much earlier, in response to my implied scepticism about his authorship of the song, backed by the excitement in his voice and his irritable way of utterance, though it is hard to get the feel of the auditory element in print.

In general, his talk often obscured itself into mumbling, making it very difficult to understand the meaning in an instant on the spot, especially when a phrase was uttered fast, but I usually refrained from asking him to repeat what he said partly because I was afraid that it might annoy him if I did it often, and check the flow of his words, and also because I thought I could possibly manage to decipher it later if I listened to the tape repeatedly. Surely enough, many parts were decipherable, but there also

remain as many parts that are obscure, which are indicated by brackets in the transcription below. What I regret more is that the parts I found unintelligible when I was interviewing him sometimes turn out to have included the kind of information that would have prompted me to make further inquiries in the same direction or get into a new direction with a new set of questions.

Four years after this interview I met Jimmie Davis again in Beech Springs near Jonesboro in Northern Louisiana on the occasion of his annual reunion gospel concert held on the first Sunday of October inside and outside of the Jimmie Davis Tabernacle that was built by his "friends" at the place which used to be the old sharecropper's cabin where Davis lived in his younger days with his family. I didn't dare, however, to interview him again because of the relaxed atmosphere that dominated the whole event and because there were so many people who wanted to greet and exchange a few words with him.

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10. 55 to 11. 55 A.M. 29 August, 1983

**In Jimmie Davis's office : Room 217, 8312 Florida Street,
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

The thing I didn't know was that there was a book...

Oh, yeah...

This was published by a small...

That was my....T-O-R-U...

Yes, um, T-O-R-U M-I-T-S-U-I.

M-I-T-S-U-I...I've just put Governor...I'm not a governor now, but

I have been twice, and I put it on there...

Thank you.

[.....]

This was published by some firm in Texas...

Yeah, Waco.

So I didn't know...

[.....]

If I had known this one, then I could have done some, you know,...

Yeah, you can get a lot of information that's right there.

And I read a part of it last night.

Yeah. You can get a lot of information from there.

Yes, especially about your younger days.

Yeah.

Very interesting. Um, let me see, do you know that a German record company...

A German record company?

Yes. They are going to release a reissue LP of your Victor and Bluebird recordings. An LP that will be released sometime in October. You didn't know that?

No. [...]. What are some of the songs they got? You know?

Yes, I think I have a rough idea, like "1982 Blues"...

"1982, 32 Blues".

"1982 Blues".

Yeah, [...].

And "Saturday Night Stroll", "Red Nightgown Blues", "Davis's Salty Dog", "Sewing Machine Blues"...

What Blues?

"Sewing Machine Blues".

Yeah.

"High Behind Blues", "Easy Rider Blues", "Home Town Blues", "Rockin' Blues", "Tom Cat and Pussy Blues", "Penitentiary Blues" and "Arabella Blues"...many blues [...]

U-huh.

Those which are, you know, un-, unavailable.

Uh?

Unavailable.

Yeah. They have just got all my... I, eh, I wish they wouldn't do it, but I don't [...]

Well, there's an increasing number of people who like this old-time music.

Yeah. Yeah.

Especially the music before the war.

Yeah.

Speaking of the musical side...I heard that you did some recording at some radio station, you know, KWKH...

That's Shreveport....I was at that station. That's where I started out. On Friday nights for a few years.

Was it in 1928 or so?

Or twenty...maybe started in 28, 29 somewhere there, I don't know. [I started in WEN] and 29...I suppose I was on the [radio] ...

Didn't you do recordings for them...

Yeah, I did a record for them, yeah.

Was it for Paramount?

No, no. They didn't have a recording company.

Just a kind of transcription?

Yeah. I wonder [that if they got records, they must have put them on the market...but, eh, you have to have a distribution, you know,...] they didn't make a business of it, you know,...if somebody wrote in for them, they'll get them. If they didn't write in for them, we didn't go to the trouble of tryin' to sell them.

U-huh. Do you remember if you recorded in Chicago?

Yeah, I recorded it, I believe, in Chicago.

And perhaps you sang with your own accompaniment.

No. I had, eh, I had a couple of fellows. I don't know who they were. I don't remember who they were now. I don't remember.

Do you think those recordings are available now?

No, I wouldn't think so. I have not, I haven't seen or hear them for a long time. I didn't try to keep them because I didn't especially care for.

Um, I'm very interested in your house, you know, where you were born. Is it still existant?

Yeah, that's the old...well, no, the house where I was born is not there. But the house where I grew up is that little old house right up there.

Oh, so it's now kept...

Yeah, I'll give you a pic-, oh, year, it's still there. That's where...I got a picture of it in there. I'll give you a picture. And I...it's where the Jimmie Davis Tabernacle was built...the Jimmie Davis Tabernacle by the old house. That's where I lived in the old house. That's where it is.

And do you have a kind of family reunion there every year?

Well, we have a reunion [...]. Just everybody is reunions. We meet there...in October. Always the first Sunday in October. We meet there, and there are

different groups singing all. It's a singing of a gospel nature, the kind we had last night.

This gentleman, Gus Weil, traced your family back to 1839 when your father Henry Davis, no, grandfather Henry Davis was ten years old. How could you trace back...is there any document...?

Well, I know I don't have it. Well, we just learned it from some of them from there back, you see, and, eh. . . .

And he did some research on it himself?

Well, from some of my folk, you see, well, then, he did and I knew him when I had a little kid, you see, and I...we tell that boy...came from Plains, Georgia and my daddy, why, he knew. . . . That is about as far back as I knew.

I see, so this is what he researched.

Well, eh. . .

Not learned from you.

Well, eh, he learned from as some of the people, you see, eh. . .

Oh, yeah. . .I see, and um, . . .the first part of this book tells a sad story about your sister, Elsie.

Yeah, that's when she died.

U-hum, when she was four. Do you remember how old you were at that time?

Well, I was, eh, I guess I was. . .I guess eleven or twelve years old, maybe.

Eleven or twelve, so you were six or seven years older than Elzie.

Yeah, yeah, maybe I was thirteen or fourteen years old, oh, yes.

And this also has a very interesting story about your school days. This kind of school, the image of school I get from this book is quite vague. Was it an elementary school or . . .?

Well, it was, you see, everybody went to school there, and there was one room, and it has a first-grade over here and they teach them in the first grade, and then, um, he move over here or moves them back their seats, and they get them into the second [grade], into the third they had one teacher. [...] one room and one teacher. Teach all of 'em. We didn't teach above the, maybe, seventh or the eighth grade. Something like that. They didn't have a high school. I first went off to a college, a high school in Winnfield. One time stayed two weeks, got homesick, from about thirty miles from home, and I came back. And next year they built a high school there, you know, they built a high school, and er. . .

It was in Beech Springs.

Beech Springs, yeah. High school is consolidated. A community over here, some community over here, over here and over here, and all come here. No bus, they just walked. Walked to school, you see. And we haven't...would...which mean...are some, eh, I guess there were some two hundred students there.

I see, and are they from six to...

Twelve.

To twelve?

Well, it was eleven then, but later on, you see, we had twelve-grades' school, but six... [we had] six high schools.

This tells that you had older students like twenty-three or so.

Yeah, you did, and some people hadn't been to school. But, you know, they would learn a bit. You take my grandmother. She couldn't [...] a picture. She couldn't read and write. She didn't know one from a two, a three from a four. Well, we had no school where she grew up in Arkansas up there.

I see. And you walked to your schoolhouse for two and a half miles. I can't imagine how it was. Was it through some woods or...?

Some special road didn't we cut across. Through the woods there was a trail, through the woods. About a mile through the woods. Yeah, we had at least a mile of woods to go through. A forest.

Is it wide enough for a wagon?

Wagon, no.

No? Just for people?

Just for walk. Or ride a horse or whatever. No. And you had branches of creeks, one at a time could cross..., you see. There was no place for wagon.

Did you often go by yourself, not with your friends?

Oh, you go by yourself. And if you want to go somewhere and visit at night, the people would walk that road at night, you know, by themselves. Either a man or a woman, nobody had any problems.

No problems?

No problems.

How about wild animals?

Well, no wild... We didn't have any of that. We didn't have wild animals that would bother us...like...a few small ones.

So it was quite safe even at night.

We thought nothing about going...anywhere we want to go by ourselves or with somebody. Any time, day or night. If somebody would get sick out there, you know...when I was a kid that age, it was, eh, about seven, six, seven miles to the nearest doctor. Well, I had to go, and I started at midnight, and ride a horse in the town to get some medicine, you know, see if we could wake the doctor and get some medicine and get him come out there so [...]. You see, my mother had eleven children, and we didn't have a doctor at any-of-them's birth. And we just had midwives, and a man would come and help out there, but we didn't have it at hospitals. And my mother and sister died and we didn't have the undertakers, people started smellin' pretty quick, you know, more so than wild animals. Seems like... And they would sprinkle carbolic ashes 'round the room. It was used as a deodorant. The doctors they didn't come there with somebody to mourn. They'd go ahead and make the best of it.

See, I still can't have a geographical image of the place. Was it, eh, just a flat-land or....

No. Up there it was hilly. Not mountains, not mountains, but a hilly land, you know. [...] And down you had a little branch or creek down there, you know. And then you had sands and the road, sand-dust bed, you see, what you call hard-pullin' in the sand [...]. Then you'd have these red slick hills when you got a car. You couldn't go up the hills driving a car, it'd slide off in a ditch. And the road was slippery when it was wet.

But the area has...there must have been lots of changes now.

Yeah. Oh, yeah. Now you have a hard surface road all through the country. The [mayor of Caril.], he had to come horse-back or buggy, sometimes he would come on buggy, and when the road got real bad, he'd come horse-back. Didn't have much bag mail to bring, he put it all on a horse on his side. We didn't get the mail much.

It was not in this book, but somewhere else I read that you had some back injury in your high-shcool days.

Yeah, I did. I hurt my back in a ball game, and the back tricky now, you know, I can't pick up a lot. If I do, it would sore for a few days, you see. So I don't pick up. I used to pick up anything, but I didn't know the value of being in a right position when you pick something, you know. [When you've been long a bit], well, I feel right

on my back. We didn't have an indoor court, and this was on the hard, frozen ground out there.

And you slipped?

I fell and hit my back on the sacroiliac region.

And did it last long?

No, no. I played some when I went to college. I was strapped up with some adhesive tape round me like that and wired around and played, but I finally quit 'cause I'd come in, and, eh, I'd be so tired, I'd just lie around, and hated to move, you see. I'd get in under the shower in the college, and get that bandage real sore when I pulled it off, but I had to be bandaged up to play.

Didn't you have any doctor or nurse at the high school at that time?

No.

So you had to go all the way to some doctor.

We did, eh, go to town to see a doctor or get one out there sometimes if you could get one out there a little bit. We had one doctor, so old he couldn't get around much, but, eh, we had one. . . [. . .] still I would, still see him a while back out there. He died five or six years ago. [. . . at those ages. . .] if they wanted him he'd ask if they had any money, and they'd do him a favour, 'cause sometimes they'd go see him and they wouldn't pay, you know, and the doctor can't keep doing that.

I see. What made you want to go to college?

Well, we had, eh, nobody out my country, my community, they had ever been to college, you see. I was the first boy that had ever finished college there. There were three in my high-school class, two girls and me. And the two of us still live, and one girl, one of the girls, passed away. And the teachers say, "You ought to go to college", you know, and tell us about it. I didn't. . . I'd never seen a college, but then I decided to go and I was gonna keep quiet, and then I told my daddy, "you can bring them the mule here, I'm going to college". And I rode a freight train down there, Pineville. That's across the river from Alexandria, Louisiana. And, eh, I [. . .] got a job, well, washing dishes there in the school, in the dining room, working in the yards and I got to pay my way, and I got, eh, next year, started playing and singing and playing on a street corner. Pass a hat. Sometimes an officer, a policeman come by and say, "Push off". I'd go way down and get on a corner somewhere else and go again.

Was it in your late teens?

Yeah, yeah.

That means you started playing and singing at some time in your high-school days.

Yeah, we would sing. We just went down and meet at the church. I'd just sing, no preachin'. No servicin'. Just sing. We'd have a singin' in somebody's house that had an organ or piano and an old rolling piano or a fiddle and a guitar. We just sing, you know. And we'd sing. Then I got into a glee club down there. At Louisiana College. And then I sang in, eh, I got in a quartet. And I sang with a quartet. And we had to...then I came to LSU for my graduate work, and I got in a quartet, the picture of them right there on the wall, four boys [...].

Is that the Tiger Four?

Tiger Four, yeah. I'd sing with them, and we'd sing at an old theatre right here in the town on the scenic highway, and we would sing there occasionally on the Sunday afternoon. We'd get five dollars, that's a dollar-a-quater-piece to sing. And then I sang on a street corner here in town.

When did you learn to play?

I didn't never, I knew a few chords when I was playin', I didn't have always the right chord, but I would play.

According to some source you started playing the ukulele first.

Well, I did, I tried a little bit, but that didn't amount to much, and you can't get what you want out of ukulele, so I tried the guit-tar...

How did you get it? Through some mail-order?

Yeah, I think I got it through one of those...Sears or some place I got it in a little catalogue, and the guitar didn't cost much.

And you wanted to buy one. It was not at your home...?

No, [I didn't got it at home]. My mother played harmonica sometimes [...]. She did it pretty well. When she was eighty, she played harmonica. My daddy played a violin a little bit, but not very well. We didn't have anybody out there who could play a tune, I tell you true.

He had eleven children, including you. What about the others...?

Well, my father and mother and grandpa and grandma Davis with us. There were fifteen of us in one house. Most half of them slept on the floor on the pallet.

Yeah, like in a song.

Yeah.

Any other member of your family played anything?

No. When they did learn to, they learned it a little bit later, and now I have a

sister who plays pretty well. But she learned it . . . when she was grown.

Can I have the names of your brothers and sisters because I couldn't find them anywhere?

Yeah. The brothers . . . [they are] Jesse, Wallace, Henry, and Reece. The sisters, they were Minnie, Lettie, Alma, Elsie, Leila Mae, and Dorothy.

So, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, and you. And you are the?

The oldest boy.

I didn't know that. Oh, your father was the youngest. . .

Of the others.

So you had, in a way, had to take care of your sisters and brothers?

Yeah, I did have a field to work [...] with them. I'd see that they work, you know. They couldn't hoe, pick cotton, or plough. They could bring water to us, water in a jug. You'd see a little one just struggling along with that jug of water, a bucket of water. If you put too much in the bucket, it'd be fallin' down and spillin' all the time.

When was Dorothy born? Was it when you were in college?

No. We were born all . . . I wasn't at college then.

So all these younger sisters and brothers were together with you?

We were close together, yeah.

I see, I've never been to this city where Louisiana College is located. Was it a small town?

Well, Alexandria is a town with about, eh, sixty thousand people, I would say. But now just across the river, across the river, Pineville, and it is pretty small, it is kinda small town. [...] Pineville has about, maybe, twenty thousand people.

Do you think you made enough money by street-singing?

Well, I didn't make, I had a drop-out, eh, and this half a year one time. Then I didn't have any money, so I made a crop, working in a field, and made some money and came back.

Oh, you had to do that. Well, what sort of music did you listen to or hear at home?

Well, the old-time stuff like, eh . . .

Gospels and the blues. . . .

Not the blues at all, you know. Like "A Little Rosewood Casket", and, eh,

"Death of Floyd Collins" and "Jesse James", "Casey Jones", "The Wreck of '97". I was at [...ville] , Virginia, once in a church. That man was there a few years ago [...]. He saw the record, and he told me about that morning in the church. Forgot his name.

Did you have any opportunity to listen to records?

Well, not early, no. A little later on when we were in senior high school, junior and senior, I had chances to listen to the cylinder records then.

Oh, cylinders. Was it at school?

No, that was at someone's house. Not at high school, no.

And do you remember what kind of music you listened to?

Well, they [were the] was more or less a classical music. Pop...maybe. Sometimes kind of a pop music, or then, maybe a big band, or opera singer, you know. All that kind of stuff. Then the World War II came and...

The World War I?

The World War I, and lots of songs came out of World War I like "'Til We Meet Again", you know, and all the kinds of songs I don't want to know...

How about "Lily Marlene"?

Huh?

"Lily Marlene"?

Yeah? All of those songs...lots of songs came out at that time...

How about in your college days? Did you also hear some records?

Hear what? Oh, yeah, we heard records, then, yeah. That's when Gene Austin was a pretty big name. Not Autry, Austin, whose pictures up there. "My Blue Heaven" and "Ramona" and some others.... That's when he was big.

You also sang "Blue Heaven", didn't you?

Well, I did it, I did it back, I can't think way back there...

When did you first get interested in Jimmie Rodgers?

When, when I was in, right after I left the university.

So it was in about 1927.

(A telephone call. Mrs. Templet, his secretary, comes in and talks with him.)

Well, we were talking about the influence of Jimmie Rodgers. When did you first hear him?

I guess I first came out...we did "Blue Yodel No. 1", you know, and the other side was "High Up on the Mountain".

And it was in '27?

Was that when it was ? Well, I don't make any difference when I was. That was when I was just leavin' college. . . .that's when I started workin' . . .

You mean you heard him in person or through records?

Well, I heard him through records, then, eh, I went one time, well, he was recording at the same time that I was, and I heard him, eh, then.

You started recording sometime in late '28 or so?

Yeah. '29, '28, and then, eh, . . .and he died. When did he die ?

Uh, '33. 1933. And he started recording in '27.

And he made a few. . .six or eight numbers the day he died. Carried a nurse with him all the time at that time. I knew his wife well. She wanted me to sing at her funeral. She wrote me the last letter she ever wrote to anybody. It was hard to read because she wanted me to sing "Taller Than Trees". I did that at the concert last night. "Taller than trees, down your knees, taller than trees". She said, "It's gonna be a beautiful spot out there, and it'd be very appropriate that the song would be just right to sing it there", but I didn't go, because I didn't, don't like to sing at the funerals.

Well, do you call it an influence, you know, Jimmie Rodgers?

He influenced me, yes, he was. Most of us were influenced by him, because we kinda take, eh, copy him as much as we could. Nobody could copy him because he was the best. And [. . . .] he wasn't a great musician, you know, but he was good enough, and, eh, and I thought his diction, and his plain spoken words were the best I've ever heard. And, of course, certain songs he keep singin' then, and nobody was singin' too much anyway. [.] I think he spurred a lot of people on. That was like the old Carter Family, you know. I used to hear their records way back there, and that was even before him.

All those recordings, you know, the Jimmie Rodgers' recordings for Victor and the Carter Family's recordings for Victor, they were all released in Japan. So the people who want to listen to all those records, you know, should buy them from Japan.

What sort of people in Japan that are grown speak English, do you think ? Who understand English ?

Well, I don't think most of them understand much when they hear songs.

Songs, when they hear songs, they don't understand.

Just parts of songs, the key-words, like in a chorus, you know, some words that are repeated. Sometimes I use that kind of songs as text at college.

Yeah, that's good.

The students mostly learn the educated language, I mean, eh, standard English, but sometimes I try to show them that there is a variety of English. . . And I sometimes use the records in Southern dialects, in Australian dialects, Canadian ones, Scottish ones. . . .

Is your machine on here, I didn't know [. . . .].

I think it's on.

I just wanted. . . .

Here's a quotation from a person named Bellcase. I guess you met him, Gordon Bellcase.

Yeah.

Here he says, "I guess everyone out my way was tryin' to write a song back then". What did you mean by that? Some other friends of yours were also writing some songs?

Yeah, you could write songs, [. . . .] there's a lot of people who write songs, you know. [. . . .] We'd have some of them up there in high school. Some of the boys and girls would write and we might sing them in schools. I forgot what they were now.

Well, you graduated from Louisiana College in 1927, I guess.

No, '24 then. '27 from LSU.

You graduated from Louisiana College in '24? What did you do before you went to LSU?

Well I taught for a year or two high school and coached basketball and tracks, and then came LSU.

I see. So it was not when you were at LSU. It was before you enrolled in LSU.

Oh, year, before I came to LSU, yeah. When I left LSU I went to teaching college, Dodd College.

Yeah, after you took the degree here.

I taught there, and then I got appointed a clerk in the Criminal Court there, and stayed there for a few years. [. . . .] and then I ran for [the office there, a member of the council] and I had charge of the Police Department and the Fire Department.

I'm especially interested in the period when you taught at Dodd College. How did you get that position? They only invited you to. . . ?

They only did, yeah. The board. . .

The board of directors there wanted you to come? It was when you were twenty-

six or so? *Why, can I ask you why they did want you to teach history?*

Why ? Because that was the subject I had had, and I could teach that, and I had classes in sociology, you know, psychology and, eh, and, eh.

What did you major in the college, Louisiana College?

Education.

Education. And how was it, teaching there at Dodd College? Was it interesting?

Well, I guess it was interesting, because the girls there, they were almost my age, you know, and, eh, but I enjoyed it all right, but soon I decided that I didn't want to be a teacher, and then got a chance to try singing some here and there, you know, and I did it, and I got to write some more songs, and recorded. First one or two I wrote, I hit with.

So you liked singing more than teaching.

Yeah.

And you worked there at Dodd College only for one year.

Yeah.

You also...in addition to your singing career, you went to work as a clerk of the Criminal Court of Shreveport. In the same year? At the same time? Soon after...?

Yeah, I got, eh, the man up there retired and then I took over.

What kind of work did you do ?

I just prepared the criminal dockets, the traffic dockets, you know, fussin' and fightin', disturbin' the peace, drunk drivers, larceny...

Where did you live in your college days, and at the time you taught at Dodd College? Did you live in some dormitory when you were a college student?

No, I've never, no. In town.

In town. Like in an apartment?

Yeah.

How about in your Dodd College days?

Yeah, that was when [...] I taught one year, I lived in an apartment.

Ah, you did. Then you went to work at the Criminal Court in Shreveport, and you also had a regular programme at some radio station?

Yeah. On Fridays.

On Fridays. Were you busy, you know, singing there? To prepare for singing. . .

No, it wasn't. I knew a fellow who played the piano, another one play the guitar

sometimes, and, eh, we just go out there, we'd just go ahead as a programme. There was nothing planned about, we just write the things down and sing 'em. I might sing 30 minutes, might sing an hour.

Didn't it interfere with your work at the Criminal Court?

No. It didn't. I did it. Out there at the college I just started doing, but I didn't tell who it was singing. I didn't know if they'd like it or not. And that was one reason I decided to pick it up as a job and give up the college.

U-hum, but you didn't change your name when you were singing?

No. I just didn't tell who it was when I was singin'.

Was it O. K. for the Criminal Court for you to sing?

Oh, yeah. No problems there.

But, see, you also made a contract with Vicotr, RCA Victor when you were working as a clerk. I think you sometimes had to go traveling, you know, to do recordings. When did you do it. . . .?

Well, the first time I tried it was in Memphis, and, eh, but I wanted to record, eh, . . . one time.

You had a permanent work, you know, at. . . .

Yeah, I did, but could get off when I want to go. I recorded "Nobody's Darlin'".

That was for Decca, wasn't it?

Yeah, that was for Decca, yeah, but I tried to record "Nobody's Darlin'" and "The River Flows" and "You Are My Sunshine" for. . . . I had a date with Columbia in Dallas, Texas over there. Jimmie Rodgers was recorded at that time, and I got over there and I took an old boy to play, I had one musician, he had. . . . brassy, you couldn't excite him. He was all time brassy out goin'. He never had been to a studio like that, he got scared to death, so then we went down. . . . that was in the prohibition days. They got him a pint of, eh, bootleg whiskey. He drank it, he got drunk, and we started to record, he cussed 'em all out all now. Bad languages, carryin' on something awfull. And, eh, so then, eh, they ran us home, took us off, wouldn't let us record. And I went back later on, and in about '32 or 3, to record, eh, "Sunshine", "You Are My Sunshine". And I made it, but, eh, two musicians, I had four boys, two of them got sour and liquored up. They played so bad and I sang so bad I told them not to put it out at all, just forget it, and then I finally recorded "Nobody's Darlin'" in '34 and two of them were all right, but "The Old River Flows" at that time, and '39 I got, . . . I made my third stab at "You Are My Sunshine".

Why did that group, the Rice Brothers' Gang record it?

Well, I mean, I told them to record it if they wanted to, but, I mean, everybody was makin' . . . I told it to everybody there. Everybody knew it, I was singin' it all the time, you know. Just like "They Was Leanin' on My Shoulders", you see. Tex Ritter, he wanted to record, put his record out first, he wanted to put it out first.

But, before you got a contract with. . . .

(Loudly) But I had a record way back there that I didn't let out before anybody record "Sunshine", I had one recorded, but wanted to do a better one, I didn't want to let it out.

Could you tell me about your meeting with Ralph Peer of Victor?

I was singin', and, eh, he wrote me, and I told him I would try, but I didn't go there, [. . . .].

Did he come to record you?

Yeah, he came to record me.

Did he come to record in some studio?

Yeah, he came to record me in Memphis. In a hotel. They'd set up in this hotel, most of all 'em did the same thing.

Were there some other singers?

No, when I was there. Sometimes there would. One time I recorded in Charlotte, South Carolina, and the Carter Family were there. And I recorded, there were two of us, they were there, and I was there.

How about other musicians?

I took them with me. I took my own musicians with me.

Oh, you did. Do you think Ralph Peer had something in his mind to produce some image out of you?

Well, I don't know, but what I did went over pretty well at that time, and he was satisfied with it. So . . .

I'm asking this question, because you sang a certain kind of songs, you know, the blues. . . . He wanted you to record these songs, or. . . .?

He was just, you could do just what you wanted to do.

In that case, I'd like to ask you. . . .

But, eh, he didn't care much for "Nobody's Darlin'", he [sold, he sold, he sold that song]. He didn't care for "Sunshine" too much. I tried to get some other people to record "Sunshine" [. . .] maybe '33 or 4, somewhere there. But nobody was interested

in it.

Then you met Dave and Jeff Kapp. . .

Yeah. They organized Decca. I went up there and recorded for them at the same time when Bing Crosby was recording, Jimmy and Tommy Dorsey, Ella Fitzgerald, the Andrew Sisters, about that time. . . I told them not to pay me right then and wait and see, now it came out. . . is that O. K., because they just start, maybe they didn't have much money. But everybody hit. I hit with "Nobody's Darlin'" and, eh, I did "Sunshine". I didn't let it out, I just messed it up.

What made you move to Decca from Victor?

Well, I thought Decca was gonna be better, Decca, Decca Company.

Promising?

Yeah. And Peer saw it, too, you know.

Oh, he did, too. I just referred to the German record. You sang lots of blues, and I'd like to ask you about your association with black people in your younger days. Did you have black people at the place where you grew up and listened to their songs?

Yeah, oh, yeah. I'd go to the churches [. . . .]. And I, when I made most of these blues I had a black in there with me singin', I mean, playin'.

So you often heard them singin'. Not only through the records.

No, I just heard them singin'. Out in the cotton fields. We sang together.

You mean, you sang together?

Yeah.

That must have had some influence on your music anyway. Did you have any special favourite singers? I mean, black singers? Like Blind Lemon?

Well, I [.], she came on later, like Mahalia Jackson, you know. She's good, one of my favourites, she came later, you know.

How about in older days, like Charley Patton and Blind. . . ?

I don't remember them.

Maybe you didn't hear much.

No, I didn't hear much.

How did you make these songs— "Nobody's Darlin' "? Was it intended to be a hit?

No, I just made it, I liked it. I thought it might be. . .

And you had it before you signed a contract with Decca?

Oh, yeah. I had much song written then. I had "Nobody's Darlin'", I had "The

Old River Flows", and I had "You Are My Sunshine", and I had bunch of them I could make. And when I made "Nobody's Darlin'", Bing Crosby liked it, he made it, and eh, G [...B...] made it, W[ayne Cane], Andrew Sisters, and a big fine orchestra in England. I wish to have that record, I wish I knew where it was, but I lost it. Ambrose [...], he had a great orchestras and he made it. They put a verse in it that I didn't write. I didn't like it, but I put it in there, that verse, "My mother's dead in Heaven, my dad's goin' down below, Sister's going to see my mother when I'm agin', nobody know..." But I didn't like the verse, I don't use that verse now.

When you recorded "Nobody's Darlin' But Mine", did you have to go all the way to Chicago? Did you go by train? It must have taken a few days?

No. Somebody stole all the wheels of my car.

And you had to stay in Chicago for a couple of days to record?

I stayed there for a week, but I had a cold and I was too hoarse, and I stayed there [...] make a great record of it, so I went to New York, and I was there recording [...] McIntire. His group, the Hawaiians backed up Bing Crosby a lot. They were playin' in Lexington Hotel. They could back me up and make a record of it, "Nobody's Darlin'" [...] so we made another record of it, but it didn't sell. Old country...we kept sellin' but it didn't sell.

You actually met Bing Crosby at that time?

Oh, yeah, I ran into him. He recorded some of my songs, and he...

He must have been very young as you were.

Well, yes, yes, he was a fairly young man, yeah.

Before you made "You Are My Sunshine" you had this song, "I Wish I Had Never Seen Sunshine".

Well, that, I recorded it before "Sunshine", yeah. Way back, that was pretty early. I recorded it, but I recorded some of these, but if I didn't like them just I didn't like "Sunshine", I didn't let 'em out, I didn't let 'em go, you see. I didn't release...

Does that "sunshine" in "I Wish I Had Never Seen Sunshine" have anything to do with "You Are My Sunshine"?

No, not especially, no, no. I think it was Johnny Robertson who wrote that song.

Did you write the lyrics and Johnny Robertson...?

We just mixed it up together, practiced singing', put verses like "sunshine", and I had fifteen or twenty verses of that...

So it's a real collaboration.

Yeah, yeah.

How about in the case of "Sunshine"? Charles Mitchell. . .

We had, eh, I guess we had twenty verses, you know, all kinds of verses, you know. . . it's, eh, . . . we picked up what we want, you see, and they accepted it, what we. . . when I recorded it, more or less. And everybody was singin' at that time, but I sang it on the air [. . .]. I traded it out, some song he was writing. I traded it out from some of my. . . for his [. . . .] "You Are My Sunshine", I wound up with this.

The tune of "You Are My Sunshine" is also a composite, the melody itself. You did and Charles Mitchell. . .

We worked together on it at that time. We worked. . . and it was kinda. . . and I'd been singin' it for a long time before, and it's a kind of old. . . I guess it was an instru-, a kind of a Hawaiian tune, something like. . .

Yeah, he was a steel-guitar player.

Yeah, hu-huh.

How did you. . . did you just play the guitar and did he just play. . . the Hawaiian guitar, and. . . ?

Yeah. When I got to record, I didn't play the guitar, I couldn't play well enough to play. I didn't want to play the guitar. I guess somebody else.

Did you work quite a lot with Charles Mitchell?

Yeah, he worked in the governor's office down here. He had been leading my band for a long time.

I like those recordings, those in the late '30's and early '40's with Charles Mitchell as a leader. I'd also like to ask about your first interest in gospel songs. Was it. . . ?

Well, I'd always been interested in gospel songs. When I grew up, I learned to sing those when I was goin' to church, you know. Go to church, and then, eh, David Kapp, he said, "You did, I think you'd fit well into that category and I started singin' some of these songs as well as the others, and my daddy, my father said the same thing, and so I got, eh, . . . my first one was the one that I did last night—"Someone to Care", and now so I'm doing more. I keep with 'em. I'm still writing, you know. I write a lot of them, I don't record, I started on, can't finish 'em, sometimes I finish 'em.

Did you record many gospel songs for Decca? Not many?

Not quite a few, not many, no. About half and half.

When did you start mixing them with secular songs?

Well, you take like the songs I did last night, "Louisiana This One's for You".

That's not a sacred song, you see. And I got another song on there called "Saddest Goodbye" on that album. It's not a gospel song. Most of while I do these, I may take, pick the old songs and do it over again in a country style.

So you didn't suddenly start singin'...

No, I didn't, no. Even in churches, sometimes, our church in town, next to the largest in town, two months ago, and I sang "You Are My Sunshine", "Nobody's Darlin'" and a lot of other later songs I recorded years ago like "Days in Our Memory" and, eh, ... [...]. They don't mind, but I don't like these. ... I like country songs as long as they are not too dirty.

I don't think it was this book, but Bellcase says you collaborated the song, "I Heard That Lonesome Whistle Blow" with Hank Williams.

Yeah. Hank, he and I traded some songs. I had recorded that several years before he ever started singin', you see. And he liked that, and we traded some songs, you see. And I gave Hank that one, he gave me [half a] two more songs. They didn't amount very much, because "Lonesome Whistle" was a pretty good song, and that's one I had, I wrote years and years ago.

Did you often, I mean, sometimes see him? I mean, you had an intimate relationship with him?

No, no. Well, I knew him, eh, first he came to my house sometimes to visit, and sing and play when I was over in Nashville, you know, and we played some songs.

Was it at the time when he was married to Audrey?

Yeah.

And here's another guy, Moon Mullican. How did you find him?

Well, I heard him play one night in... he was in Corrigan, Texas, down between Shreveport and Houston, and heard him play, and I wondered if he can play for the campaign with us, so... and I signed a contract with him. Signed a contract. But he had a partner in that place, he had a lounge, you see, a night-club. But he went for me for the time being. And he weighed a hundred and fifty-seven pounds, and when he died he weighed two eighty-five. But he got to drinkin' a lot, and you know, [...], but he was a very fine musician, a great entertainer, one of the best entertainers in the business.

Did he already play in that style?

Oh, yeah. He played... he was... I preferred him to any piano man I could find, that's the reason I hired him.

And another fellow, Elvis Presley. He has given credit to you as one of the older generation artists who influenced his musical taste and style.

He did? But I, I tell you, I tell you, Presley forty-dollars a night on a few occasions when we started up there, made some dates to play with me.

In Shreveport?

Yes, Shreveport. When he first came there, he was lookin' for a job to get a little money, and I played some dates. I couldn't give much, I could give him a little bit, and he was glad to get it, you know, but I told them up there, "This boy he's gonna be great", because he was playin' to most of my crowd, you know, but I said, "He take these young ones up, but takes these some old ones, too". And he was good.

What kind of songs did he sing?

Well, he'd sing songs like that, eh, "Blue Kentucky Moon" [...].

(Tape ends.)

But you didn't see him after he became a rock 'n' roll star?

On, no, I wasn't with him then. I haven't seen, but I had met him occasionally to see [...]. We hadn't [...]. He didn't...he had his own band and he could choose what you wanted to see.

I'd also like to know about your music-publishing business. Bellcase says something like...a kind of apprenticeship in New York and a music-publishing business in....

Well, I had a...I started an office in New York [...] in Brill Building...

So you were there.

No, I wasn't there. Somebody was running for me...but I had an office in Hollywood and Chicago, but I had to attend to all the business, so I said, I'd move it down here in Shreveport. You see, I don't...my name is not...we are not listed in the phone book here, my name is not. I don't want to be tied up with too much.

How did you learn the business in New York?

I was run [...] up there in Peer's office, and one moment I learned a whole lot from....She's still with him, she stays at home. She has a phone at home in New Jersey, she's back and forth. As long as she lives...they are gonna have her, 'cause she knows so much about it. She doesn't have to have a book to find out who wrote what, who did what, who did this, who didn't do. She's so smart in that business. [...] I was 'round a lot in her office there. Not only with myself, but with other artist until I, eh,...I learned something. But you learn something every day, like where they

changed the copyright law a few years ago, you know. So I had some changes there, little things you got to learn about. [.....] he was with ASCAP, but I'm with BMI. Well, I told [.....] it was all right, but ASCAP has got to be responsible for his half if you want to do it like that.

Was it after your first governorship that you started your music-publishing business?

No, I started, got started before then. Maybe so, I don't know, it was about in 19-, eh, . . . it was after the governorship the first time. Right after I got out of office.

How about your movie business in Hollywood? Was it after your governorship?

No, that was in, during my third-year of four-year term before my last. They came here and they wanted to make a movie. They wanted me [.....]. I took out twelve days to go out there and work out there. They did the rest of it here in the State, you know. And then I went back I got out, and did a leading role in another picture. And then, eh, I did work with some of these, Tex Ritter and all the different people, you know.

And each time did you have to go to Hollywood?

Yeah, to Hollywood, yeah.

It must have taken a lot of time.

Yeah, well, it did. But I had time when I made the others. I wasn't a governor then, you see.

I see. Well, I'd like to hear more about "You Ary My Sunshine" when you used it as a campaign song. Did you sing it as it was—"You are my sunshine. . . ." ?

No, I didn't mention anything about that at all. I always started my song campaign with the songs that had some interest in it, that they'd be interested in it [.....medley.....]. And then, song that, I'd sing a song they knew me by, you know, like, eh, "Nobody's Darlin'" . . . and so many other songs. I used a couple of French songs, "Calimba", "Bayou Pong Pong". And then, eh, "Grand Mamou" (Big Mamou). I'd sing some of that. . . I'd learn some songs and would sing the songs they know, you know.

So, "You Are My Sunshine" was just one of the many songs. . . .

You got many songs, yeah.

I just wondered if you changed the words like, eh, . . .

No. . . . Years ago I wrote a song called "Christ Is My Sunshine", way back in early thirties, but I didn't record till almost fifteen years ago.

You wrote it in early thirties?

Yeah. "Christ Is My Sunshine". Thought I might make some gospel recordings sometimes, and I did and I put it on there, but it wasn't one of my best gospel recordings at all.

It was not in this book, but in what Bellcase wrote. . . .about the soldier who you happened to see in a dance-hall. He told you something like, eh,

Well, it's in that book, too, you got. . . .

Yeah? Do you remember when it was? The year. . . .

Oh, it was about in 19- and, eh,it was in early fifties, maybe. . . . No, it was back there. . . .it was before I was a governor. Right after I was a governor. Right after I was a police commissioner.

I see. So it must have been in early forties?

In early forties, yeah. I was playing in some dance-hall, you know, like Bob Wills [.....].

You mean you sang with them ?

Well, no, but I was on the program with. . .and I knew Bob Wills, you see. [.....] he used to play dances with his own band, 'cause he didn't got there half of the time, because he was drunk before he got there so many times, which is a bad, I mean, [.....], so he was a fine entertainer and had a good band.

It must have been a very hard work, you know, palying in those places. Well, here he says, you "ran for the police commissioner of Shreveport and was elected". . . .

'38 to '42. I ran for the public service commissioner, and I served the public service commissioner of the district when I ran for governor.

And you got married when you were the police commissioner?

Yeah.

In '36. Wasn't it rather late to get married? Wasn't it when you were 32?

34, but I don't know [.....]. [.....]. I've been working to pay off my debts.

Can you tell me about Alvern? Was she from a family in Louisiana?

Alvern? In the town where she lived she was a teacher, a schoolteacher in Shreveport, and her father was a doctor there.

Was she the only child?

No, there were two other girls.

Was she the oldest?

No. She was the little one. She died of cancer years back.

Your son was born in '46? Ten years after your marriage?

Yeah, maybe so. '45 or somewhere like it. . . . well, are you gonna [...] anywhere else in Louisiana, just here Baton Rouge ?

I just came here to Baton Rouge to get in touch with some of your relatives and your former colleagues.

Then you go back to Japan ?

Yes, in two weeks.

You just came here in last day or two ?

Three days ago.

Came here on your own ?

Yes. Well, I think, eh, I'll come again tomorrow.

All right.

I don't want to take much of your time.

You come again tomorrow. That'll be fine. Come again tomorrow, and that'll be fine.

I don't know how much information you can give me.

We covered a lot today, didn't we ?

Yeah, it was more than an hour. So maybe it's enough for today, and I'll come back tomorrow.

Yeah, we'll talk some more.

10.25 to 11.40 A.M. 30 August, 1983

. . . go to my house to lunch. I'll take you to my house to lunch if you like.

Oh, I'd love to. Very nice of you. . . . Well, this book or any other material doesn't say anything about where you were born, the place where you were born.

That was out in the country called Quitman, Louisiana. I was from the country called Quitman, Louisiana.

Is it near Beech Springs ?

Well, that's a few miles from there. We moved to Beech Springs later, then spent the rest of our time there. Then, you know, we got scattered, goin' to school, goin' to work, marryin', off here and there, you see. . . . We talked yesterday about this old man. . . called Henderson. "Hello, world" Henderson. Are you familiar with that term? If he come over at night, he'd stay on for three or four hours. He'd say,

"Hello, world", and he told his record [.....] called Hello-World Records. I remember, I was talking to a relative of mine and a memory which I thought was right, and I checked it back, and I made, there were two records I made for them. One of them was "Blue Heaven" backed with "Ramona".

Was it released by some company. . . . ?

Well, I put it on that for him, 'cause we didn't have our market. [.....] people wrote in for it. [.....], then I recorded [.....] "You Are My Sunshine" and, eh, backed with "Mama's Lullaby". When I left his station, but he was a good fellow to work with, a good man, I think he, I don't know whether he had any money when he finally died or not. I don't know how much, I don't know how he was fixed financially.

I read about the film, Louisiana, in which you appeared. I haven't seen the film yet, but it kind of depicts the house where you grew up. Do you think it was based upon the facts? Are they. . . .

Well, that house, that wasn't the house. That wasn't the house in the film. But it was a . . . our house wasn't that good. You know, one of my houses you see that over there on the wall. And then we finally ended up with this one right here. I'll tell her to get one of those picture if you want it, right now. (*To Mrs. Templet, his secretary*) Give him a picture of our house, will you ?

So it's a post-card.

Uh-hum. We got a couple of 'em. And it stands out there, you see.

How were the windows? No window panes?

Well, you get windows like that, you see. We didn't have any. No plumbing, you see.

How about lights?

No electricity. It had, eh. . . . kerosene, yeah.

I don't have any idea of, eh, outhouses.

We had an outhouse out in the back. You can't see it there.

How did you make fire? Of course, with matches?

Beg your pardon ? We made it with matches, yeah. We had pine, rich, what we call rich lighter pine, pine that's rich, rich pine. It burns easy, you see. You can break it and put that in there, then you put your oak, put the oak on top, 'cause it burns longer than pine-wood. [. . .] some of the wood. And you put that on there, and in real cold weather, well, we would, eh, since some were sleepin' on the floor anyway,

well, we would, maybe just before we went to bed we'd put on what's called a back-log, a big log at the back of the fire so that it would burn, had some warmth there all night long. And when we ran out of matches, I dunno if you've heard of this or not, we'd get a bucket and go down to a neighbour's house somewhere, half a mile, and get some, some fire, you see, take these ashes in the bucket, put ashes in the bucket, put some coals in there, put ashes on that. You get there and take the ashes out, they'd stay there...the ashes, they'd be alight.

Keep it burning.

Yeah. You put that under there, put some papers and blow it, and it'd catch up.

Were there any shops and stores?

No, no. The nearest one was about six miles.

And did you have to walk all the way?

Well, if you went to town, you'd go in a wagon, you know. And there were two stores there. Little ones.

What was the name of the town?

Quitman.

You had to walk.?

Yeah, it's about eight miles to Jonesboro. And the roads were muddier in that direction, so we used to go to Quitman.

Did you have a Saturday-night party at weekend?

Sometimes we could have, we called them "Jump Josie", you know. "Jump Josie", where they, if they didn't have instruments to play or anything, they would sing, they would sing clapping their hands, [...] got out and dancin'. Kind of square dancin' more or less. And, eh, you could do this sometimes when they wouldn't let them go to the round-dancing where they were held up. You see, they wouldn't let them do that much. I mean, it's just one customery to do it.

Was it the second place for you to learn music, the first place being the church?

Church, yeah. You sing a lot in school.

In school you sang Stephen Foster's songs?

Yeah, we sang a lot of Stephen Foster songs and some others, you know. Everything from the "Star Spangled Banner", "In America", "The Battle Hymn of Republic", "Dixie", all the songs. One time some girls and my sister and another girl wrote a song about a boy. He was [...] field [...] named Chester Howard. He stepped on a rattle-snake and the snake bit him on the heel. Out there they had to

make up thier own remedies, you see. Well, they got a big old chicken, an old hen, dominatin' hen. And they split it open alive, you see, and put his heel down in that hen and wrapped it, tied it and turned him loose, and he went off runnin'. We could see him runnin'. amd they thought it would draw the poison out.

Does it really heal?

I don't know, he got all right, he got all right, they wrote a song then about Chester, and... "Chester did go across the field, big old rattle-snake bit him on the heel", and it would go on from there, keep on singin'. "Oh, Brother Mitchell, oh, Mitch, go tell my dad, I'll buy a wheel, I know I shall [.....] ". We'd sing that at school while he was there, he and his brothers'd sing with us.

Were the schoolboys well mixed with other classmates?

Oh, yeah, more or less like a family out there, in the country, you see. There was no difference there.

And it was a one-room, you know, . . .

One room there, then we had two-room school, and they built a junior high school when they consolidated all these communities. And that building, it was a frame building, but it had room for elevengrades and a good auditorium, and a good building with a good timber. It cost six-thousand dollars, that's all, and the entire building cost six-thousand dollars. Today I don't know what it'd cost you. It'd cost you maybe two hundred thousand.

Does that mean that the poeple in the community helped building it?

Yeah, a man named Tyles, he was the contractor, and he had an overseer, and the commusity helped. They put pavement out there, and we walked up across the road and up to the building. That pavement is as good as it was then. Now the school's gone. They sold it, tore it down for the few bits of timbers. When it got to goin' into towns, these other high schools they had better schools.

Did you have black childmen as classmates?

No, we didn't have them. They did have their own school somewhere up there.

Yesterday you told me something like you sang with those blacks, you know, in the field. . . .

We worked together, you see, my mother, my sisters and brothers, all worked together out there in the field. But I never knew of any bad incident of a bad happening at all, any time.

Do you rmember when you especially had an interest in their songs, in the songs

of those black people?

Oh, yeah, they have, they've got their own, they've got a lot of rhythm, you know, and they beat it out, you see, and that was kind of fascinating to me, 'cause we didn't have that much, you see. And there was one or two who could play the guitar pretty well. I used to use one of them [.....] recorded when I first started. Ed Shafer died. . . .

Oh, Ed Shafer, is he "Dizzie Head"?

Yeah, "Dizzie Head". That's what they called, "Dizzy Head".

Was he like that?

No, he wasn't but I don't know why they called him that, but he drank a good deal. I took him one time to Charlotte, North Carolina, to record with me. He was. . . . And, eh, along with Snoozer [Quinn] who wound up with Paul Whiteman, and he drank so much beer, he just died. Quite a drinker. And I had Buddy Jones with me. And this "Dizzie Head", he was Ed Shafer. He, eh, . . . I missed him on the train, couldn't find him, I went back to the dining room on the train, and he had his head upon the table, had his hat down, he was playin' and playin'. He didn't sing, he just played, [.....the guitar.mighty well]. And he gets some money, and I got him placed down in a hotel stayin' in town and tried to get him out, I couldn't find him down there when we got there, couldn't find him. I walked around the court-house square, and he was out there. He was out there up on a little table out there in the front, and he was playin' there, passin' a hat.

Collecting money?

Collecting money.

Well, you mentioned Buddy Jones. Can you tell me something about Buddy Jones?

Buddy Jones, he used to play on different stations there like I did, and, eh, we got to be good friends and when I became the police commissioner, we worked together, and recorded something, you see. We'd maybe write together on some of these things. He couldn't play much guitar, and I couldn't sing much and play hardly at all, and so we recorded anyway. And when I became the police commissioner, I put him on the police force on that department, [.....] department. And he stayed there till he died of heart attack when he was drivin' a car. The car it hit the telephone pole, [...] he was dead I guess by the time he hit the pole. He'd already passed out.

Do you have any pictures of him? I only saw one picture. . . .

I don't have any single, I don't have it. In a group or not, I don't have one. I wish

I had one, but I don't have one, you know.

I think I told you in my letter that I compiled this Decca hillbilly series. These are the records I compiled. This volume has Buddy Jones on one side and you on the other side. When I wrote the liner notes to this record, I tried to find some photos of Buddy Jones, but I could only find. . . .

Well, he didn't have very many pictures out. . .

Wasn't he handsome? Good-lookin'?

He was a nice-looking boy. Black-headed, blue-eyed, six-feet tall, nice to [. . .]. Here is a great record I wish I had a copy of this which is called "She's Sellin' What She Used to Give Away". I don't know [.], no.

Wasn't it a hit? Wasn't it popular?

Pretty good. And the other one is "Butcher Man Blues". Do they have these on there ?

Yes, but the series is out of print. But I can send you a tape copy.

[. . . . a tape copy] I'll write it down here. I'm gonna write it here ?

I'll be pleased to make a copy. You know, American Decca, MCA is not interested in releasing this kind of reissues.

No, no.

So we, I mean, the Japanese companies got interested and asked me to do, compile these reissue albums. And American MCA sent master tapes to Japan, and I did the selection. How about Buster Jones?

Well, he was his brother. He played some with him, but they didn't work together too well. Buster died earlier than Buddy did.

And he played the steel guitar?

Steel guitar. He could play. I used him sometimes, but when I started nobody played too much in that way, you know.

Was he as good as Charles Mitchell?

No. Charlie Mitchell couldn't play that swing stuff, but he was a good, sweet guitar player, sweet, smooth, you know.

And Buster Jones was more jumpy or rhythmical?

It looks like him here, you see, but he's not over here, you see. It's down at the bottom, you see. He comes through, he leaps through. That's not his dance that's on the other side, you see. [.]

I will make a cassette copy for sure.

Yeah. I wish I could get that.

Back to your childhood. Did you have any books in your house?

Library books ?

In your home.

Now ?

No. I mean when you were a child.

No, we didn't have any books, we couldn't afford books. We just had books you get at school. We borrowed books. One was called *Slow Train through Arkansas*.

Was it a novel?

Well, I don't know. This crazy story is about goin', ridin' the train to Arkansas, you know, and all that. They are funny. It was funny to me then, 'cause I hadn't heard many funny things. But we didn't have any...in the school. We didn't have much library. We were short of books and short of money, too.

This book doesn't tell anything about your first love, you know, in your elementary school days.

No, no.

There was no first love?

No, we just court around, maybe in one of these "Jump Josie", and passed notes, you know. It wasn't involved like it is today, you know. They get together now whether they are married or not, you know. I guess they do over in your country, too, don't they ? Do you have, eh, much homosexuals there ?

No, I don't think we have many.

You don't have them much.

It is something, you know, clandestine.

Very far removed. Well, here, this is a pretty wild country over here, you know. [...]. But you see [...].

Uhum. Especially in San Francisco and New York.

We're now falling, getting back... [...back to the school...], 'cause people over here are very fine, you know, [you read about all these things], but I don't know, but in the school today, most of them were real fine and were getting' along all right. In the world you get all kinds of people anyway.

Well, ...the day before yesterday I enjoyed your singing at the First Baptist Church, and I was impressed by some of the songs which emphasize a mother, a mother in general. I think that is characteristic in country music. Mothers in country music.

Yeah. You sing about mothers the whole life, and the dad, too, and then the family. And the thing about it is, soon, it really tells a story more or less.

Does your song, do you think, have anything to do with your own mother? I mean, your real mother?

Yeah. Well, I, eh, and I write some of these songs that are little recitations, that are rather true, you know, and the mother songs go pretty well. For good songs, of course, you've got to have good music, a good tune you need good words and a really good tune.

This, eh, Mr. Weil doesn't tell much about your mother.

Well, he couldn't get into all that. He [.....], you see. She was just-a, my mother was, eh, her daddy was, eh, a commercial fisherman. Fishery with nets in the rivers and he'd catch catfish in [Buffalo], and take 'em to the market and sell 'em. She learned there now to make these nets when she was a young girl and could make these nets, you know, like, eh, trammel nets and all these kinds of nets, eh, gill nets. You wouldn't know what they are, I suppose.

Did he live in Northern Louisiana?

Yeah.

So he was a fisherman in the Mississippi.

Yeah, and also down in the Lake Charles, fishing down there, the river down there.

And your mother grew up in. . . .

From Ruston, Louisiana. She was born in Ruston. That's in northern part where Louisiana Tech University is. That's whese she came from. Daddy came down here from Arkansas [.....], and they get married and. . . I don't know how they met. I don't know too much about my family. There's something I'd like to know now. We didn't talk about it much. We just learned some things as we grew along.

Both of them must have been very strict.

Yeah. Oh, yeah.

Especially 'cause you were the eldest?

Yeah.

This book tells something very interesting about your first trip to Shreveport. And, eh. . .

And got put into jail. Well, I said then, I told him that one of our, there were five of us, you know, and on the train, he was riding and one of them get killed. Get killed. Someone cut his throat, guess a-robbery, but he only had 50 cents. They put us in a

"caliboose", that's a jail, "caliboose". We just had a big time, we could just holler and they just thought we were drunken, whooping and hollering. None of us drank anyway. They put us in there and kept us all night long. Next morning they said to me, "Are you ready to go?" I said, "I'm ready, I'm good and ready". I said, "Let me out". He said, "You take this street and that street and another street". I said, "Pardon me, but you just gave me the directions, northeast, southwest, which way is it, the sun's up and, and I know which way to go, just give me the right direction".

The policeman didn't know where Beech Springs was?

No, no. He'd no reason, he'd never heard of Beech Springs [...another place] Quitman. He didn't know anything about that either, you see. But I didn't live close to a place anybody knew anything about.

So you had a scaring experience in Shreveport.

Yeah. When I was the police commissioner there, I said, "I wanna find that man who put him in jail over here", when I get in, I swear, but I didn't because I knew he's a good man, a good officer. [...] I was just kiddin', you know, I was just kiddin', you see.

In a couple of years you visited New Orleans all by yourself. On your own?

Yeah. I started school down there. I stayed down. . . I went to Soulé Business College there about two weeks, I guess, and ran out of money. I didn't have any when I got there. Didn't have a suitcase. . . had my clothes tied up in a bed sheet, over my shoulder.

Did you go by train? Wasn't it an adventure for you?

That was an adventure. Too much for me. I was ready to go back to [...].

What made you go there?

Well, I thought I would take a business course, you know, to learn to be a bookkeeper. . . you know [...] learn accounting, what not. That was too much town for me.

And you spent only two or three days there?

Yeah, [that long]. Two days or a few days, then I got out and came back home.

Your father kindly gave you money for the train?

Well, he had all he had. He didn't have much. I borrowed a little. . . It took me a long time to pay him back. But I got on workin', paid him back, 'cause he didn't have any money.

Then finally you made up your mind to go to Louisiana College in Pineville. Was

it the nearest college?

No, it wasn't the nearest college. The nearest college was Louisiana Tech at Ruston. But I didn't know anyone who'd been to college except the teachers there, and most of them came from Louisiana Tech. Someone had a catalog about Louisiana College, and they got it to me [...] walked three miles and got it. I kinda liked the place. It sounded a little country, you know, and country folks there. Denomination school, the Baptist College, but all the denominations go there, you know, like, eh, Presbyterian, Methodist, Pentecostal, Catholic, Jews, all of 'em. They didn't make much difference [...] [...] the Baptist people. They still called, eh, the Louisiana Baptist College, a good school. I've got one of them right here. And I went up there, and I liked it because there were a lot of country boys, you see. They didn't have anything here, and I didn't have anything here, so we kind of hit off together.

And you went there by freight train?

Well, eh, no...yes, I did. On the freight train [...] and got there.

Did you pay for it?

No.

No? You didn't have to?

[...] jumped off the train and it didn't stop.

Like a hobo?

Yeah. Scattered my suitcase, whatsoever I had, I had a hair tonic and, I don't, what I had, a few pairs of socks...

And they all scattered...

Scattered every place. And I went up there, and saw a light on, "Here I go to bed, here this is your dormitory", I said. " [...] this is a girls' dormitory". I said, "That would be all right". "No, you can't give me that down there". There was one or two boys already moved in. I was [ahead of the time], you see. I'd come down, I tried to get a job, washing dishes...

And this book says that you saw the shower for the first time...

That was the first time I saw soap. [...]slipped...] and I almost killed myself. I fell flat on my back on that concrete. I'd never seen a shower before.

What did you have in your house? What kind of bath?

What we had was a tub, a big washtub with water. Sit it out and we'd warm it, or in summertime put it out to get warm out in the day. We'd use a tub, use two or

three tubs round there.

In summertime you used it outdoors.

Yeah, uhum. Sometimes we'd go out to a little creek close by with branches, and go down there, and get in there.

This book doesn't give the names of the members of the Tiger Four at LSU.

Well, there was Otis Brussard [...]. He sings baritone. No, he was singin' lead, and I was singin' tenor. I wasn't a tenor but I was singin' it, and we had Albert Watkins. He was the bass singer, and we had L. J. Allemand. He was the baritone.

Wasn't there any change in the members?

No, there was no change...

What kind of songs did you sing?

We'd sing, um... , not country songs. They'd sing other kind of stuff down here.

Some pop songs?

No pop songs. [...] not that. More or less classical songs. Some of these are songs I wasn't used to at all. One like, eh, "Right across the River Here to Port Island", "Put on a Show There Before You Go Out on Tour", music [...]. So we put on our own programme. I'd sing in yodel, one of these boys plays jazz saxophone, clarinet. We had our own programme, 'cause we were likely to get seat done for it, they didn't like it, [...] found it out, he didn't like it.

And you also sang on the street while you were at LSU, didn't you? Was it better than in your Louisiana College days?

Well, yes. I learned more songs, I think it was better. Cost a little more down here. I'd pick up... it was better than washin' dishes, get me more money.

Was it down there in Baton Rouge...downtown?

Yeah, down there, just there, we had a lot more people.

Just the people gathered around?

A few of them gathered around. Some look and go by. Some stayed a while and pitched in a dime, a nickel to buy me a corn. Don't get any dollars, just the change.

This, Baton Rouge, is of course, much bigger than Alexandria.

Well, yes, but then it wasn't much bigger than Alexandria then. It's grown very fast... Alexandria hasn't grown that much.

Then, after you took the master's degree, you started teaching at Dodd College, and you went back home and lived there, did you? You lived with your family?

No, my family lived down in Beech Springs, you see. They lived down there.

Dodd College was out there. I lived in an apartment there, and then I taught a year, and then I went to the court and then I got married, you see.

But didn't you often go back home, gave some of your money to your family?

Well, I had come sometime, yeah. That's all.

You saved money for. . . ?

To pay off the debts. It took me seven years. I didn't have a car for seven years. I walked the town about a mile and a half while I lived down there for a while.

It was when you were at Dodd College that you got associated with Huey Long?

Well, yes, I lived out there, and I had heard him speak when I was small, when he was in high school, I guess, when he was runnin' for public service commissioner.

So you knew the name.

Well, I knew the name. So I was living right across the street from [the place] where he lived there, and I took a few walks on the street [with him] down the street sometime. . .

How did you know he was Huey Long?

Well, I knew him, I knew him well, I knew he lived there, and was quite friendly. And, eh, so he walked and I walked with him, and he said, "Do you want to get in politics? I knew you'd take it". I said, "No, I don't want to get into politics. You won't get me in that".

Was he an interesting person?

Yes, an interesting person was he. Full of politics, you know, that's the main thing he studied, politics. The thing was that his brother Earl Long was. . . he was practicing some law, but Earl was a lawyer, but he never practiced law.

And was it at that time you started singin' at KWKH?

Yeah.

And how about your girl students? Did they hear you singin'? Your girl students at Dodd College?

No, they didn't know who it was.

You never sang. . . ?

I told them later on. I didn't sing out there, no. And that news station is not there any more, KHKH. [...] we sing there a whole lot, you know.

This person, W. K. Henderson, when did he hear your song? The owner of KWKH. . . When did he first hear your songs?

Hear my songs? I went out there one time [...] had a piano in [...] we [...]

sing some, and he invited me out, and I got goin' there on Friday nights for a long time.

When you started singin' there, you were accompanied by . . James Enloe. Did he play the guitar?

No, he played the piano.

Oh, the piano. And did you play the guitar?

No, I din't play. . . I might have fooled a bit, but I couldn't play much and I'd just rather . . . he'd play.

So he just played the piano, and you sang.

Yeah.

Then it must have been a little different from, you know, those country. . .

Well, it was, well, we did a lot of pop. We used to do "Ramona", "Blue Heaven", you see. And we kind of drifted into country, the blues and [rockin' stuffs. . .].

Oh, later on? I see.

I get a lot of [chorus. . .] of churches down there like this. I don't remember the church down here, you see. How far back were you there other night ? Where were you sittin' there ?

About, eh, the tenth from the back.

Could you understand it all right back there ?

Huhum. Yes, I did.

We used the PA set there that belongs to a friend of mine. Instead of the house set, the house address system, it's better than that, and the audience squeal sometimes. We tried to get it fixed right. [. . .] I was tired that night, 'cause I've been up for the engagement in Natchez, Mississippi [.] three or four hundred miles [.] Texas, and back over here to this. They were very nice down there, the audience was very attentive, you know.

Yes, they were very attentive. Well, after KWKH, I mean, at the time when you were singin' at KWKH, you got a contract with Victor, meeting Ralph Peer. . .

Well, after a short time, not before very long, because we had this thing coming up and I decided. . . Peer told me. . . Decca and they were just starting this, the brothers, Jack and David Kapp. You see, they were the ones who started the album business, you know. The first that was out was a little album, it had about eight songs in all. And then they got twelve. Now they make 'em more or less ten songs on 'em, you know.

Is it true that with the royalty you got from "Nobody's Darlin' " you bought a

hundred-acre farm outside Shreveport? Did you buy it?

Yeah, that was where I got most of the money, and I thought of buying it and I just signed a note and paid for it, 'cause that was a good song for me.

And your family moved to the farm?

No. No, no. We never moved there. I just rented it out.

Oh. Then where did they live, your family at that time?

Well, they still lived in Beech Springs. I was married then, I lived in Shreveport. Then, you see, and Shreveport is right across the place where the farm is, in the next town, Bossier City. . . . The farm, mine, that was right over across the river, you see, and that river separates Shreveport and Bossier City. And I sold this farm sometime two years ago. I sold it off to. . . . Now it's no more farm now, you got business houses there, hospital, you know, stores, insurance companies. You got everything there.

Well, was it after you quit Dodd College that you got acquainted with Judge David B. Samuel of Shreveport, or. . . .?

No. I was working sometimes on Saturdays. I go down there, and, eh, pinchhit for a man who was [. . . .] there from the [. . . .], but he had to go [. . . .], and I go down there, and work, and I would help in the civil department. There was a man there, who was workin' in there. Then I used to go to college with [. . . .]. He became a lawyer, became, finally became a judge, and then very poorly Samuel died just when I was elected. I met Samuel when I was workin' there as an extra, you know, just fillin' in, and then when this man moved away and quit workin' any more, he wanted me to take the job. I didn't know whether to take it or not. I was on the verge of goin' to some place in Kentucky, teachin' at whatever school, college. And I decided [.] stay around there, and I can do the singin' down there, and maybe I would, it might amount to something, you know. I had [a least] of a chance with exposure, and during my vacation, you know, in summertime I'd get Charlie Mitchell there, and we go out play those theatres, and we would make a tour, and make a little money.

So, it was not after you quit Dodd College that you got the job at the court?

Well, I worked extra there, fillin' in down there, 'cause I knew the people there. And that's why I met the judge, but as soon as it was out, the school was out, then I got the job down there.

They must have paid more than you got at Dodd College?

Well, I dunno, I went down there, I started, I think. . . .that was regulated by the, eh, City Council. I made about two hundred dollars a month, and they got in bad shapes, and I got down to a hundred and ninety dollars. I was goin' down, not up.

Then it was a little lower than the amount you got at Dodd College?

Yeah, and I was married, and my wife was teachin', and we were married and we moved into a home that was her and her mother's. The mother charges fifty dollars a month for room and board and laundry.

So you entirely gave up, how shall I say, the intention of making a teaching career?

Yeah.

Any reason?

Well, no. I just decided I didn't want to teach, you know, I just thought it would be better. And I wouldn't be tied down this much, and I could. . . .there was Judge Samuel. . . .if I wanted to go off to record, you see, Chicago, New York, some place. . . he was perhaps willing for me to do it, you see. We get someone to fill in and make out the court document in my place, and I'd make a short trip up there.

You also did tours when you worked as a clerk there, didn't you?

Yeah, but not far away. I go to some place to some benefit, and we'd do a little bit of business there. We had a little band with Buddy Jones and Charlie Mitchell and two or three more there.

Was it like two or three times a week?

No. Not that much. Not ever once a week. Once a two weeks, maybe.

And was it usually at the end of a week? On weekend?

Yeah. Yeah, yeah, on weekend. I recorded all the time when I was a governor, you see, but I didn't use my time with the State here. I would go to like, New York where I was goin' to record, and Nashville, wherever it was, I'd go on Saturday, you see. When it would be outside. . .and I'd come back on Sunday. I would pay my own, and it wouldn't be the expense of the State, and they couldn't complain about it.

Then you had to fly?

Fly. Oh, yeah.

How was it in older days? You had to go by car to do the recording. . .

Yeah, sometimes you go that way, you could. . . .

Must have taken two or three days to get there.

Oh, yeah. It took a long time. If you go by car, it was crowded with people and musical instruments, you see. No air-condition.

When you were singin' at KWKH and appeared in the neighbouring towns, what was the costume you had?

Well, I wore cowboy clothes.

You mean you were already in cowboy costumes? Oh, yes? When did you start?

Well, after I got singin' some songs, I got on, I wear pretty good cowboy clothes, and pretty colourful, boots and hats, you know, spurs, and, eh, I used to go with (*Tape ends.*)

Then you got, eh, a walkin' heel that's twice as big as [. . .], and it's pointed. It's a little bigger, you see, a walkin' heel. Then you got a flat heel just like that one on the shoes here. That's the one I finally ended up with. We'd stand a long time on the stage with pointed heels for four or five shows a day. It's real tiresome. I had given all of mine away, though. Gene Austin gave me, and Gene Autry. That's the picture over there. He gave me a beautiful suit I have there in the picture, a beautiful suit. Someone else gave me that one there. They make too thick out there, and it's too hot here. Too heavy.

When you performed in such one-night appearances, were you kind of making some preparations for becoming a politician?

No. I knew so many people. When I worked at the Cirriminal Court, I wanted to get a better job, because. . . and I, eh, I had all the Council against me. I think they were a little envious because I might run for the job, so I decided I would run, because. . . see, I played in so many things for benefits, and there's places all over the town, all over the city. I knew a lot of people, and I didn't have any trouble to win 'em. So I stayed there for four years, and then a public service commissioner. You had three of them in the State, and one of them [. . . .] twenty-six counties, parishes. We have parishes all over the State intead of counties [. . .]. Nortern side of the State and all down, this side of Alexandria piece, all across the State [. . .]. And I had [. . .] and I know a lot of people [. . . .] problem, and then in two years the governor's race came up, some of the people got at me to run for governor. I didn't want to run for governor, because I was doing all right, I was gettin' places, I was makin' money recordin', and I had the job at the public service commission, didn't require much time at all. And one of your easier jobs in the State to have. . . and the public service commissioner, and Huey Long, that's what he was before he was the governor.

You got married when you were a clerk at the Criminal Court, and this book tells me that you went on a honeymoon by car, but you didn't have a car at that time, did you?

Well, I had a car. I had, I had bought me a second-hand car. We'd run to, a hundred miles away down there, and Tyler, Texas, where we went, I said, "You get in the car, you got any money", she said, "I got a little bit of. . . I got a few bucks here", 'cause she [. . . earned] more than I did, so we had enough to stay a day or two over there and eat, and get a room, you know, and came back home.

And you lived with Mrs. Adams?

Yeah, with Mrs. Adams. That's her mother. Mrs. Adams, I talked to her the other night. She'll be a hundred years old in October.

She's still alive?

Oh, yeah. [Very alert] . She got a mind like she's got a mind like an eight-year old girl. She's real sharp, you know. Takes a walk everyday. Takes exercise.

And does she still live in Shreveport?

Yeah.

Does she live in the same house?

No. She lives in a rest home over there. They got a good rest home for people like that, and she is there, a good place to stay, and take care of well, and a good place to eat, and she has her own phone in the room there, her own TV and all that. They usually put two in a room and she has a [bay-room], and a good roommate, it seems to be. I go see her occasionally, 'cause she's the kind of mother to me.

How about your parents? Did they still live in Beech Springs when you were a clerk at the Criminal Court?

Yeah, yeah. They were livin' . . . my father died during my first term in the office, and, eh. . . and then my mother died some ten years later.

When you ran for the police commissioner, did you discuss it with your parents?

Well, no. In that particular case I don't think I did. I did when I ran for governor. And my daddy told, well, I believe perhaps you can win it, but remember this one thing—worse than losing, that's winning. Meaning it was a tough job, you know.

Did you also sing when you ran for the police commissioner?

Yes, sir. I had my band, I set up a platform with the public-address system, and the same with the public service commissioner. The same with the governor. And

they always. . .my opponents criticised me real heavy for that. They told about me singin'. Called me "Singin' Canary". "Canary, Caddo Parish, Caddo Canary's comin' to town". But I didn't worry a thing about it. So I didn't want to sing when I was runnin' for the governor, but I went to my first meeting, big crowd in a big park, I suppose two thousand people, and when I got through, the crowd said sing so and so, sing this and sing that. . .some of women to hold the baby. . . .I said, "This is not a singin' matter, but maybe we get together some other time". They said, "Well, he's done a big shot, [. . .high hat] and he won't sing". And I got home at night, [. . .] stayed up most of the night, worked. . .I'm gonna get my band together, goin' get Moon Mullican, hire him. I went on and took it with me, and because I was branded, I said, "I might as well make the best of it".

And there were movie appearances in Hollywood. Was it when you were the police commissioner that you appeared in the films?

Yeah, [. . .], yeah.

Did you think you could keep workin' as the police commissioner while, you know, you. . . .?

I didn't. . . .I just took more or less some vacation, take that all for the vacation.

But you appeared in about six movies. . . .

I worked in a few, just as extras, you know. One of the gang, you know.

You did them during your vacations?

Yeah, the vacations and the time like, eh, . . .

Well, then, you didn't have any more vacations at all.

Not much. I don't take vacations.

How about your brothers and sisters? Some of them still lived with your father and mother?

Well, they began to move out. I think one of them. . . .the youngest brother had died, and then, eh, another brother he was in the army, they were, I don't remember, I dunno.

Do you think I can see some of your brothers like Jesse. . .is he still alive?

No, he passed away in California a while back. He had to go out there and live out there.

And Wallace. He lives. . . .?

He lives out in the country farm out at Jonesboro. It's close Beech Springs. Beech Springs community.

And Henry ?

He's here in town.

In Baton Rouge? And Reece?

She passed away.

And Minnie?

She lives in Shreveport.

And Lettie?

She passed away.

Elma?

She lives at Houghton.

And Leila May?

She lives in Texas. That little town out near Atascosa.

And Dorothy?

Dorothy. She's in Shreveport.

Well, I'd like to learn more about your running for the governor. Was it when you were thirty-nine years old? Wasn't it?

Uhum.

You visited the governor at his mansion when some of the people gathered around there to discuss about the election. Were you the youngest there among the people?

Well, perhaps so. I dunno. Younger than most of them, yeah.

You were not much conscious of your age at the time?

No.

You didn't think you were too young?

Well, I thought I was somewhat young, that was the question, you know.

Well,it must have taken a lot of time to make up your mind.

Well, it was a big decision to make, you know.

Was it when you employed Moon Mullican?

Oh, the first time I got him was when I ran for the police commissioner.

And how about the fiddler, Doc Guidry?

Well, I got him when I was runnin' for the governor twice. When I run for the governor, I get him. He's a Frenchman. He knew all those French songs, you see, and he sing 'em and play 'em, too.

And Joe Shelton, the guitarist?

Yeah, he's someone out Texas, I don't know where.

Did you hire him, employ him at the. . . . ?

Well, he was the MC for the first campaign.

Oh, yes, and do you remember the names of some other members of the band?

Yeah. I don't know, Roy Ellis out of Phoenix, and, eh. . . . [...]

Do you think they are still alive?

Well, Moon died. Charlie Mitchell died. Charlie Mitchell used to use Charlie Mitchell's wife for some [of that]. She played but she died.

How long did it take to campaign? To do that campaign?

Well, we were out on the road about three months.

Who paid for it?

Well, you. . . friends paid.

What was the hardest experience when you were doin' the campaign?

Well, I dunno, just makin' all these towns, you make sometimes from three to six appearances in different towns and stompin', and then meetin' all the people, and shake all the hands. It's tiresome, you see. You got to be up, you know, you gotta be smilin' regardless of how you feel.

You had to repeat the same thing.

Yeah. The whole lot, the same thing. And travelling. That's kinda tiresome, too, you might say. Gives 'em a chance to get away everybody and get up there, and they can work on their speeches, and see what they might go to this town over here, and something they might want to say over here and over here.

But you must also have had the most pleasant, enjoyable time.

Yeah. I like people, and if you don't like people, you shouldn't get in politics. If they vote for you or not, you ought to go and see all of them, go and see them anyway. By the time you get thought out on that [...], with that speakin', they may have changed their mind. A lot of 'em change their mind right there and they'd go with you.

Then you were in office from '44 to '48, and that was just at the end of the World War II, and it also covers the occupation period in Japan. Did your office have anything to do with the War?

No. The only thing I did, I saw, we took a band, travelled over the country sellin' war bonds sometimes. We had no official capacity. . . . We would go and sell bonds, [...] bands [...] we just go and play and people would sign up for the war bonds. [...] and invest some money with the government, you know.

You didn't have to think about the War at all.

No, no. There was nothin' to do...because we had no...there was no place for it. All we had was a State. It was twelve years before I was [...] again. It was twelve years before I ran for the second time. [...] had ever waited that long in the United States to do it again and win.

About the movie in which you appeared when you were in office, the film called Louisiana, did it take only twelve days?

Twelve days in Hollywood, yeah. But they did the rest of it right here in New Orleans, some in Baton Rouge, and, remember when I talked about Dodd College, in the same room I taught, you see, they put some girls in there, different girls, you see. The girls in there, me up teachin', and back down in the streets with chasin' all these people right down on both sides through town. Some shots in Shreveport, down in New Orleans in that entertainment district, what do you call it, whatever it was.

Did you have any difficulty in taking your time, you know, from the office to take those shots?

Well, I had, er, they didn't have difficulty, 'cause it'd be the time when you could go in and make them at night, you see.

Well, you made the life-time contract with Decca. Was it after your...?

Well, I had the life-time contract after I quit governor. They wanted me to make some songs when they changed hands more or less, you see. All they wanted was this wild stuff, you know. And I didn't want to make it, so I just dropped out.

Did you keep on appearing after governorship? Appearing as a singer?

Yeah, I do. Like I do now, you see. And sometimes in the State you have some big convention, you know, to help someone. I might go just for free, you know.

This book tells about your meeting with the soldier... Was it after the governorship?

No, that was before I came for the governorship the first time. I was singin'...I think that was while I was the public commissioner, while I had been the police commissioner.

At the end of your office, the entire Senate signed the resolution, your know, praising you?

Yeah. I'm proud of that now.

Oh, this one. They signed the resolution praising you.

We didn't agree with everything, I understand, but nevertheless we got along all right, you see. All of them signed it.

Did they really sing "You Are My Sunshine" after the signature?

Yeah. Uhum.

They did? In the House?

In the House, yeah, they did.

Oh, great.

I sing "It Makes No Difference Now" the first time I got out. They wanted me to come down there.

But you didn't have a band with you?

Yeah, I did have. I had a band played, and I sing it. I sang, eh, in the House a few weeks ago. They put it on TV. They carried it to every TV station in this State.

Do you have a list of all the different recordings of "You Are My Sunshine"?

No. I have so many I don't know. . . it's recorded in every country, every country in the world, you know.

Every time it was recorded you got some royalty. . .

Yeah.

But you haven't got any records, I mean. . . ?

No. I mean, I have some. Countries I've never heard of, and they're sending their stuff. I don't know where they are.

We sang it at the wedding of a close friend of mine.

Is that right ? Well, I tell you that Japan has a good place for me. Japan has been good [. . .] "Nobody's Darlin'", and it's good for " [. . . Shoulder] ", some of those old songs. . . "Columbus Stockade Blues". And Japan is very, always, eh, I think the last, I mean, in the last statement quarter, the biggest cheque in there came from Japan. I mean, it's, eh, different, all kinds of songs, I got an awful lot of songs, you see. Some of them might be good, a few of them are.

After your first term was over, you made a vaudeville tour over the country?

Yeah, I had my band. . .

Was it a kind of relief to you?

It was. That's what I wanted. I wanted some fresh air, you know, to get out. . . I've been workin' so hard. And I made, I think it was a three-month tour. Mostly week stands, you see, in some small town for three days, three night, . . .

But, like in Washington, you stayed for seven days.

Yeah, six days. You need a day to go somewhere else.

Where did you tour around? The East or. . . ?

Mostly up there in the Midwest. I decided not to make any more like that, I had my wife and my little boy there at home, so...and at that time I kinda settled down again, 'cause it's hard to settle down when you were in politics where you're in office... like governor.

Who were the comedian and the girl-singer? Who were with you?

I had this girl, eh, June Hart. She's been on the stage since she was five years old. She sang and dance and played the sax, and the comedian, oh, I forgot his name now, he was from California. Oh, his name was Bob Grier.

Do you remember the names of the members of your seven-piece band?

No, I don't know. It'd take me a while to dig 'em all up, you know.

And at that time you met Harry Truman in the White House?

Well, I knew him before that. I've been with him before that, and in two places. But he came, he sent someone down to get me for lunch the day. I didn't want to go, I said, "You're too busy", and he said, "No", and came down... We played "Missouri Waltz", "You Call Me [...] Sweetheart", some of these songs. He played a little bit, you know. [...] pretty well, and him and his wife and his daughter, Margaret, and they took me back. But I guess he was like anybody else, sometimes you wanna [...] let your hair down, you know.

Then you came to Shreveport...

Singin', playin' dates, singin' here and there, writin', recordin', that's what I was doin' then.

Even appearin' in some films?

Yeah, makin' some films.

You had to go to Hollywood?

Yeah, to Hollywood to do it. I had to go, I went out there and I spent two winters out there in Palm Springs, just rented a house and I stayed out there. My wife and my folks were out there. And my band was out there, and they played in the place sometimes. I'd join 'em there for a special occasion.

And your parents were still alive at that time, and you took them to Palm Springs?

No, no.

Did they just keep on....?

Out, out there. I took my wife and the boy, some small boy.

When did this house get deserted? How long did the people live here?

Well, they lived until my father and mother got sick, and one of them moved to

town, to Jonesboro five miles away. And after that...then my mother stayed a little while and then she moved up to my sister's in Shreveport. You know, I'd better... I'm goin' to the dentist in a minute, and I'd better do that, and we'll get together tomorrow. Will you do that? You got most of what you wanted, I expect now, you'll get to write a whole library on this. And I'll get to do that, then give me a chance to have a word with the dentist a little bit, and tomorrow get down here. Maybe you come at eleven, that 'll be all right? Then we can do that, and then we go to my house to eat lunch. Talk this and talk that. Go up there, visit the house.

Thank you very much.

It's a good deal. Workin' more, and see how that...and that doll looks, sitting up out there.

I hope it will go well with your fireplace.

Oh, yeah, it sure will. Will be all right there.

You must be tired. Keep on talking and talking.

Well, I mean, I talk, a little tired. I've plannin' to go. I got to go in the mornin' at eight o'clock, I got to go to the eye doctor. I hadn't had my glasses changed for a long time, in years, it's gettin' time I ought to have to have them looked into, you know. Quite a load there to carry....Now we'll get together tomorrow here. I'll see you then.

At eleven o'clock...Thank you very much.

O.K. Thank you, eh,...

I'll see you tomorrow.

...Tora?...Toru?

Toru, yes. Have a good day, Governor Davis.

I'm gonna try. I don't know how good I'll have. We'll work on it. Thank you, thank you for comin'.

11.00 A.M. to 12.00 P.M. 31 August, 1983

Well, sometimes they just write about some different people, and I just happened to be at the time they were writing and they talked about the home-comin'...eatin', home-comin'...the Jimmie Davis Tabernacle. That's the picture up there.

So this was the, eh, let me see, the last one in 1982.

'83, '82, yeah, '82. Then it mentions one. They go and talk about it, and we have it on the first Sunday in October, always, the home-coming. And they come from all

over, you know. . . .two thousand people there. . . .You can't get a copy, 'cause we only have one copy. Everyone makes a copy of it, you see. It's not on the counters, you know.

Today I don't think we have much time. First I'd like to ask about that chair. . . it looks familiar. . .

That's the governor's chair. This is the State seal here. This used to be the supreme court. Th[. . .] . .with. . .was the chair and they took it, and made it a chair for me.

So this is not a replica, but the real one.

It's a real one, yeah, it's a real one. And I got another one at my home. [.] I mean, upon the farm, you know, that one in my house, too, that I use there too. This was the first one I had.

Oh, I see. So this was the one you used in the mid-forties.

Yeah, yeah, I did. And I use the other in, eh, this is already painted over again, I guess, and I think I can do that, and put upholstery on it, if necessary.

I saw some of the pictures. . .that's why this looked familiar. . .

Yeah, yeah, it was. Yeah, they give me the chair, and I had the bed in my room, in my master bedroom. Two beds that I bought. I didn't want to have any controversy over it, so I just paid them the same, the same price I paid when I bought them. Got a mattress for them, I paid that.

And it's now. . .

That's in my house.

Did you sometimes sing in that chair?

Do what ? No, I never had occasion to, you know. Do everything but sing.

When you were a police commissioner or public service commissioner or governor, how did you practice singing and playing?

Well, I did it at home sometimes, 'cause the boys worked for the State, that could play and sing. . .a lot of employees. They'd like to play and sing with the guitar and no matter of what kind of stuff, violin, bass, and. . . .then we get together sometimes, maybe in my house. Just stay and practice. If I got a new song and wanted to warm up that I wrote or somebody else has written. . . .we wanted to record or thought we might use the song, give it a chance to rehearse, you see. We'd meet there maybe once a week. You could learn quite a few things. . . .because I didn't go out on dates then, you see, unless I wanted to record.

Mr. Mitchell was an executive secretary in the office. Can you tell me why you chose him as an executive?

First place, he was very smart, very intelligent, he'd been with me a long time. And he played, was leader in the band long before that. And I got him from the Standard Oil Company. You know, he worked for the Standard Oil. He worked with [...] down there, and been with him for years, so he was reliable, and I got him, and he just quit and joined me. And then I got out and I got the first time, he was elected by the local officials up there, of that county, parish, as a register of voters, and he stayed there as register of voters until he died, although he played a little bit sometimes along somewhere, but we didn't play much. . . .

Was he alive at the time when you were elected the second time

I didn't eh, . . . he was sick, eh, he wasn't doin' too well, and. . . .

So he couldn't work with you?

Yes, he did, he worked with me, he worked with me all through the term.

How about the other members of the band? They were not. . . .?

Well, some, eh, a few of them worked for the State while I'm around and some of them just played with the band, played music around, you know. I get them when I wanted them, there was no one there. A few of them worked for the State, but I'd always have enough to, now Moon Mullican he worked for the State. He had some job until he stayed there, until I left, you see, and of course, Charlie Mitchell did, and I had Lloyed Ellis do the guitar. I had a girl named Zema Dell, she died later on, a few years ago.

You mean she also worked for the State ?

Yeah. I got her down from the French Quarters. She was singin' in New Orleans, and she was real good. She was a pretty good singer, a good girl.

After your first term, you went back home to Shreveport?

Yeah.

Did you have a home at that time in Shreveport?

Yeah. Well, when I first came down the first term, I was living with my mother-in-law, I was living with them, [. . . .]. Before I got out, I went up there and looked around and bought a home. And I stayed there, and kept all these years until I got ready to come down the second time. When I got down here, the president of the bar association up there, he wanted to buy the place, he paid for it more than I paid for it, so I sold it to him. And my wife got sick, sick down here, and went back to the

hospital, to a doctor, and so I bought the place right next to the mansion there. And, um, I stayed there. She passed away there. I just stayed there, and her mother, the old lady's gonna be a hundred years old in October, she came down to stay with me. She's a good company, very smart, and er, everything, she and I'd take a walk in the afternoon.

How long did you live with her?

About a year and a half or two years. She lived with me. Down there. She was down there. When I married with the present wife, then she moved to, eh, ...one of her daughters who lives in Shreveport. She went back there.

Do you especially like the house behind the new mansion?

Yeah, it's all right there. It's close by there. We have lots of lights there, they have lights all over the place, and they light up my house, and I have, ...there's mercury-vapour lights, too, you know, that light up round there. And I have room, I have almost too much room, lot of grass-cuttin' goin' on there, [...] to do this, you see.

Well, back to your first term. In 1946 you appeared in a Frank Sinatra's show. Did he invite you to the show?

Yeah. I went out there for that, yeah.

Did you go up to Chicago?

No, I went to Hollywood.

Was it a radio show or...?

It was a radio show.

Did he have a regular show?

Regular show.

He must have been very young, Frank Sinatra.

Well, yeah, he was young, and everybody was young then, you know...

He was younger than you.

Yeah, and, eh, ...he was pretty younger, and he was skinny then, he's gotten fatter as time goes on. He was thin in his first years when he started singin', you know. He was thin. But he's got, he can eat now, he's got fatter, pretty fat.

Did you see him after that, sometimes?

I saw him maybe somewhere, but I don't know where. I used to visit some of these clubs out there in Las Vegas when he was there, and saw him, and visited with him a little bit.

I think it was at the time when you owned a club.

No, I didn't own a club.

The Stables in Palm Springs.

No, I didn't own at all. The boys, eh, Charlie Mitchell [...] they got it, and I worked with them sometimes down there. . .and kept on [...] but I didn't own a club. They leased it from somebody. I forgot the man's name. They thought it was mine, people just said it was mine, but I didn't. They just write what they want to write sometimes, you see. 'Cause I didn't own anything there. I didn't want to. I didn't want to stay. I rented a home out there, and my wife and my young son stayed out there. And I'd record and work in some movies. . .and, eh, . . .so, eh, . . .but my wife didn't like it out there at all, and I just felt more at home here. But I just wanted to relax, and get out there and sing some, meet musicians, and do some recordings out there, which I did. The band played every night nearly, you know. . . .I had musicians, I had some myself. I had like Charlie Mitchell, Slim Howard, and Jimmy Thomason. Jimmy Thomason now lives in Bakersfield, he teaches that kind of stuff, about country music and, or. . . He's a good fiddler. That's where Buck Owens came from, and some of the other fellows. . .and, eh, . . .I don't know. . .

And I'd like to ask you about your horse named "Sunshine". Did you buy it when you were a governor or. . . .?

I bought it when I was elected a governor.

Was it just a personal purchase?

Yeah, a personal purchase. I wanted, I was thinking about gettin' a horse, and the fellow who lived across the farm up there—my farm was up in the northeast of the State, where my boy's farm is now. A hundred and fifty miles from here. This man told me, said, "If I want to buy a horse, there's a fellow got a horse called Mexican Pede", you know, Mexican. He lived down there near Ferriday [...] on lake and he works up there at cattle bar where they sell cattle all the time, you see. He works up there. He keeps all kind of horses. He's got a horse that can almost talk, a young horse, three years old, and a beautiful horse. Palomino three quarters and a quarter horse, and a quarter Arabian horse. And he was a Palomino. I went up there, down on a levee there. A black boy drove me. . .we picked up a horse in this turck that we found by the [...]. I got, I had my money with me to buy one, and I saw a bay horse there, and I came very near by, and a beautiful one. . .Well, I said, "I'm goin' down to this place he told me about", you see, and I went down there. And this black kid had

a gang of kids, they had eight or ten kids. Black family next to him, they had eight to ten and the kids would play, whoopin' and hollerin', run and play. I didn't tell him who I was. "I was lookin' round, I was lookin' for horses, you've got a lot of horses". I saw this horse over there that I knew this was the one, this horse here is, but I went on talkin'. I was lookin' at other horses, one over here, and I'd say, "This horse here is [....]". He'd say, "He's pretty good, you ride him, you can ride him some", and then this one over here, "What do you do with him, what you do with the horses, do you feed 'em out or not ?" "I sell 'em, some, I trade horses". And round up the cattle with 'em there. And I finally got around to this horse over here grazin' around, the Palomino[...]. I said, "That's a pretty good horse ?" "He is fine, he is the best". "How old is he ?" "A little over three years old". Weighed about eight-hundred. . . eight-fifty, I guess, then. And I said, "Can you catch one horse like this ?" "Oh, yeah, I can get you to catch the way I show you". Put a bridle on it, back 'em over here, fits over the nose, got it on down by the bank down, the bank of the river, put it on, jumped over and tied it careful. He's holdin' back like this. Well, I said, "That was pretty good, that was all right". He got on, and he rode him. . . I said, "Is he scared ?" He said, "No, he ain't scared". He got on, he rode him up back up the back steps through the bedroom right down the steps, and out there. I said, "That's all right. I don't need a trick horse". I'd already made up my mind I was gonna buy him, but I din't let him know. . . and I said, eh, . . .

Where did you use to ride?

I used to ride. . . different parades, different celebrations, different fairs, everything, you know. Then I said. . . [.. I got on. . .], and he said, eh, I said, "I don't need all that trick horse. . . How do you get him in the truck ?" "You want him get on the truck. I knew I'd get him in, but", he said. "I'll show you. (*clapping*) Get on the truck. Jump in the truck". [....] in the truck. "Out", and he jumped out. I said, "That's pretty good. You got a pretty good horse. What's the price of this horse ?" "Two-hundred bollars". I said, "That's a lot of money", and he said, "That's a lot of horse". And I said, "Will you throw in that hackamore, that bridle thing", and he said, "No, it's five dollars, that'll be two hundred and five dollars". And I said, "You just sold a horse". And I got it for two hundred and five dollars, and I said to him, "My name Davis, Jimmie Davis". He said, "You are not the singer, huh ? ", and I said, "I'm the singer". He said, "If I've known that, I would have got to you. I said, "You couldn't have got to me more, you've got all I had already". I took it home, and put

him on good feed, get good and big, he weighed over eleven-hundred pounds, he'd get growin' [. . . .]. I'd ride him at the cattle, through this creek, you know, he'd swim. I'd ride him down and I'd ride him to a fair in this county. . . .and went to a lot of ball games, a foot-ball game and led a lot of parades with him. He liked to parade. He liked the band, you see. They ever knew him better than me. He got killed in a wreck. I let some boys have him at a fraternity house at Louisiana Tech University. They didn't know how to hook up a trailer too well that he was in, and it turned over and broke his neck. I had twenty-five thousand dollars' insurance on him, but I'd have had to sue them, too. They didn't want to pay anything. But I didn't want a publicity of suing some college doys, so I just withdrew the suit, let it go. He's buried up on my farm, got a tombstone out there, the monument out there, got his picture on it, just as plain as the picture on the wall here. It stayed out there, somebody did it, but I don't know how to do it, but it stays out there.

Was it when he was eight years old?

Eight or ten years old. Somethin' like that.

Certainly you employed someone to take care of him?

Oh, yeah, well, yeah, they did, they took care. If I wanted him, why, they'd bring him to me.

And it was at that time, when you had that horse, that you met those presidents like Truman, Roosevelt, Eisenhower. I think you told me something about Truman yesterday or the day before. When did you see Roosevelt?

Well, I first met him. . . I went to New York when I first tried to start recording up there, and he was also runnin' for president. He could walk a little with a stick then, you see. He could go along kinda easy. And he was makin' his first speech for the campaign, over the campaign in Madison Square. I went down there. I was impressed by his speech, and I was impressed by the police. They had three hundred men on those big police horses. And they had five hundred policemen inside in the Garden Club, you know, to cotrol the crowd. They got unruly. You take these three hundred horses out there. They are trained, because you put the horses out here and stand here! And he stay right there. You just leave, nobody gonna move him until you come back, until your master comes back and gets on. That's where I first saw him. Then Truman and I worked. . . I met Truman in. . . we were in Marston Hotel, and he said, "Let's go down, come go with me down". Truman was a Senetor then. And he said, "Let's go down the White House". Well, he wouldn't be expectin' me,

and he said, "Fine, it's fine, I tell you to come, it's fine, you go with me", so we walked down there. We walked there, and there was the President and his wife. We visited him next time. I saw him, I was at his inauguration, twice [...]. And when I was [off on time] I went out to Ocean Springs...Ocean Side below...about a hundred miles from Los Angeles down the coast, Ocean Side. It's a marine place, marine's jumpin' off place with the marine's trainer, and he was there, and I stayed in the same place he did there at that camp, the marine camp. He'd go swimmin' every day. His legs, his legs up here were as big as my wrists, you know, and he is thin, he couldn't walk, and he'd get in the water, and they had this, you know, lifesavers on him, and he'd paddle about and swim and they'd take him out and rub him down with alcohol or [alc...] or whatever it was. And that's where I saw him there then. I remember once I had a few chats with him there, you know, 'cause he was pretty busy, I didn't, I didn't...

You were impressed by him. . . . ?

Yeah. He had a great mind. He asked me a whole lot about Louisiana, things I didn't think he would know, but he had a good mind, and he remembered very well, you know. He had different interest here, Lake Charles, down New Orleans, Harvey, Jackson Parish, all down there. He'd ask me those things and different...the soldiers camp up there and different things.

It was in the late forties, wasn't it?

Yeah, I guess so.

Then you met Eisenhower?

Yeah, I met him one time, I didn't know him, mm, er, well.

Was it when he was the President?

Yeah, yeah.

And then this President Kennedy. . . .

He and I went down to the country in a plane one time, sat there and talked, two of us. He spent a day [...] in my house for lunch, and Truman's been down to my house for lunch a couple of times. At the governor's mansion. Now that... He and me, I'm in the middle there and the other man over there and the Mayor of New Orleans, Victor Schiro. We were in the same car there that he was killed in about ten days later in Dallas. I thought we were goin' to be killed, there like, it looked like, people raisin' so much care. Some of these people from, up from Central America...

Kennedy looks very young in this picture.

Yes, he was. He was young. He rather looks younger than he was, you know. There was a lot of goin' on there. People were rasin' care, whoopin' and hollerin', cursin'....

Did both of you also talk about anything that was not political?

Not political? Oh, yeah, we talked about everything. I was talkin' about somethin' about the tidelands down here, how far we could process oil out in, out in the ocean, in the gulf, you know. How far, we went as about that, long...long time, [...] 'cause the government would claim it and we'd claim it, you see, as a State, and the government would claim it for all the States. Tidelands, case was up there, they fought that for years and years and years. And I think we decided then that [...] I'd better not talk about it. I was goin' back, but in the meantime he got killed.

Did he know much about Louisiana?

No, he didn't know as much as Roosevelt did. No, he didn't, but he did...he and Russell, Senator Russell Long were pretty good friends, and the Mayor talked about it, he learned a good deal about it from Russell, and they learned about the State, 'cause they need to know about the different States, you know.

And I understand you also met Lyndon Johnson?

Oh, yeah. I met him before he was the Vice President. I met him when he knew, ...he was the president. His wife, she was from Texarkana. Texas, Arkansas, and Louisiana meet there in Texarkana, that's why they call it Tex-ar-kana. That's where she was from.

Are you now booked for some years ahead?

Yes, I got some places booked. I go any time, I got some booked. Next year I'll go to different places, two places, you know. I don't take too many now, I got some that I go to years ahead, you see.

Just sing and, of course...

I got this place right down in this church booked next year. Down there, you see.

You mean the Baptist Church?

Yeah, yeah, the church. Now I'm goin' to, the night before that I was at a Pentacostal. Convention more or less. Pentacostal people. Are you familiar with them?

I know the name.

They are a little more louder and shout more, and a lot of singin', you know. A little more hilarious, aren't they? This Baptist church down is kinda quiet down, but

then the other night, they werer pretty good. I have a lot of places I can go, I don't take all of 'em, but I go to some of 'em.

Tied up in a tight schedule. You sound very busy.

Yeah, I am. I just take what I want. I'd be goin' nearly every day if I'd take it. Can't do that, you know. I have to kinda take care of business, and not work too much. I don't wanna work myself to death after this, 'cause Sunday night I was tired because I had been to Natchez, Mississippi, Saturday afternoon before, then I was. . . . four hundred miles from there that night at eight o'clock for the programme over there. Didn't get out of there until eleven o'clock, you see. Came back down on [.], my camp down here two hundred and twenty miles away, spent a few hours and got into the bus. Travellin' in, you know it's a converted bus where you got beds and you sleep when you want to, and you got a rest room in there and all that. And we come. . .

You mean you own that ?

No, somebody, a friend of mine, he is takin' us, I pay him to do it. I used to have a bus for a while, but I didn't need it that much. And he brought us all in here so I could make a programme that night.

How about this week? Do you have some other concerts this week?

Yes, I have. I got to got to somewhere. Tomorrow I got. . . another contract, but I got to go to a banquet where they are, well, . . . pepole from this college here are meetin' in. . . friends of this Louisiana College, Pineville [. . . .] meeting, and I go there, and get back, and then I'm goin' out with the television people. They want to make some shots out there in a field [somewhere]. And they are gonna finish something now they're doin'. And then, eh, the next night I go to New Orleans. Friday night. Friday night in New Orleans. And then next week I go to Columbus, Ohio.

It's quite far from here.

Yeah, Nearly a hundred miles.

You fly there?

Yeah, I fly. For a programme. The city auditorium.

And after Columbus, Ohio, will you go to some other place soon?

Oh, yeah. I don't know where it is, but I go. Only a few days like that, I have a home-comin'.

Has it been goin' since mid-'60s?

Well, since I got out of office, I just go, I got out off office in '64. And I just, I had some dates waitin' then, you know. You must go. I go to some places back and forth every year, one place like Virginia. I play three or four times a year, one year, in one year, you see.

So you've been. . . just keep on singin'.

Keep singin', yeah. I just speak some, but speak [. . . .], and I just go ahead and sing. They want you to sing. They want you to sing mostly. And I go up to that place, Virginia, for a programme like I had last night, I mean Sunday night, you know.

Ummm, again, about Hank Williams. . . you met Hank Williams and you felt something tragic about him?

Oh, yeah, we were good. . . . *(Tape ends.)*

He got to drinkin' first, so that. . . to kill the pains or something. . . and then they said he got on somethin' pretty strong, [. . . .] and in a way it kinda got the best of him, you know. And he, it got to where it's hard to perform, because the last programme he tried to do was in Lafayette, Louisiana. . . he never did it and the people wanted their money back, and the police escorted him out of town, you see, because they might do somethin' to him, because he wanted to perform and they'd already paid their money to get in, you know. But he was. . . unfortunately he got to drinkin' a good deal and whatever he was takin', I don't know what he was takin'. But he was a good artist, and the people wanted to see him, but he threw away a fortune, threw away his house.

Did you really see him in the governor's office in Arkansas, no, I mean, Alabama?

Alabama? No, I didn't. I was up there when I first met him. I was visitin' in Alabama when this barn-sellin' tour and Jim Folsom was the governor then. He had just married again. The first wife died, I believe. Jim Folsom he said, "Come down and bring your band [. . . .]. A friend mine who does all the singin' down here in the country, named Hank Williams to [. . . .]. Come over and be with us there at the mansion", so he came over with his guitar. He sang and played. I saw then he was good, you know. He went from there to the Hayride in Shreveport. And he, like so many of 'em, like Presley did, they went from there to Nashville. That's where Nashville got most all the artists when it started. Hayride.

Speaking of the Louisiana Hayride in Shreveport, did you regularly appear?

Not regularly, no. Just occasionally.

After your meeting with Hank Williams at the place of the governor of Alabama,

did he start singin' in the Hayride in Shreveport? Or, had he already been singin' there?

I don't think he had already been singin'. I don't think he's been there.

Did you also meet Tom Parker, Colonel Parker?

Yeah. Parker, he was the manager of Presley. He used to be. . . I met him when he managed Gene Autry. . .

Oh, yes, and Hank Snow.

I don't know about Hank Snow, but I know he managed him, he's the one. . . . And then . . . I went to Nashville one day, and there was Tom Parker, he wanted me to go up to his house and have lunch with him. He had a breathin' problem, you know. I dunno what it was, some respiratory situation. And he had an electric machine like they have here now. Ten tons as big as that, put it up there, put in a room. It picks up dust, the dust comes to it, it gathers in the dust, you know, and you don't have much dust to breathe in. I got it myself one time, I still got it, I dunno, but I don't use it. When you opened it in a room where it's turned on, you realize how much dust is in that room and how much it's taken out. Tom Parker has been at it for years, not the best of health in the world, but he was a great manager. He knew where to use Presley and where not use him.

Did you see him after he started managin' Elvis Presley?

Yeah.

You employed Elvis at your show?

Yeah. When he was for three or four shows. When he was up there in Hayride, started workin' there, didn't pay much, you see, and he was drivin' truck, you know, . . .

Oh, was he still driving truck at that time?

And always drive a truck. I don't know whether he drove a truck around Shreveport or not. I don't believe he did, but I was goin' on a few dates here and there, and I took him with me, and paid him forty dollars a night. . . .

You just happened to see him? You just happened to pick him up?

Well, yeah, I thought it'd be good for him. I thought they'd enjoy him, you know. And he had some of the programme. And then I went. . . I left to come down here somewhere, I dunno, and I started to catch a plane one day, he was gettin' over, he'd been to Lubbock, Texas, and when he first started out, two of his songs like "Blue Kentucky Moon", "Kentucky Waltz", somethin' like that. I said, "How did you go ?", and he said, "I killed 'em". They just, they'd never get over it. Knocked 'em out,

which I expect he did. And he just got bigger and bigger. Tom Parker, I guess he had a contract for ten years, about ten years. . .KWKH. . .he bought that contract. From the KWKH Tom Parker bought it. And then he had a contract. . .Bob Neal. He was the promotor, you see. He paid Bob Neal fifty thousand dollars for that contract. And he took it, and sold him to Victor.

Since then you didn't see Elvis at all? Did you have another opportunity to see Elvis?

Yes, I saw him. He worked with me some.

After Tom Parker. . . .?

Oh, no, no. I saw somewhere one time, where did I see him, I don't remember now. I saw him, but I was never round with him then no more, no more than that. He was busy, and I was busy, and I didn't have time to. . . .

You and Elvis took a different route. . .

Yeah, yeah. He could do somethin' that I couldn't do. I could do somethin' that he couldn't do. I wouldn't want to do either.

And you just got into singin' gospel songs. . .and. . . .

Yeah. He liked gospel songs.

Oh, yeah, he did. Much influenced by you. . . .in terms of gospel singing. Well, there's something that I thought about the other night at the First Baptist Church. See, the melodies and the rhythms, do they have anything religious about them?

Yes. Well, some of these songs. . .uh, some churches wouldn't go for that too much. They go for slow, kinda slow, you know, and that's all it is, but some of these churches, you take like the Pentecostal people and the Church of God. . . .they swing it up much more than we do, but stick to my own style, and the church down there sings, they sing some songs like that themselves. But they don't do too much of it in my church, but out in the country where I came from and other little towns they sing some of those old songs that got a beat to it, you see, some you can dance by.

So musically speaking, the secular music and the religious music have many things in common.

Oh, yes. Country music, I mean, clean country music and gospel music are pretty close. Pretty close, because, for instance, I sell, when I sell three albums together, three tapes in a pack, I give 'em on discount for three. . . .well, one of those albums is country, but it's clean country, and the other two a church song.

They must sound the same, you know, even if this music is religious and that one

is secular. *Don't you think so?*

Yeah. It'd go. Now I went down to Mexico for an inauguration, I had my band, and we played all the stuff, see, and then swing it up, and then they come and embrace, you know. They like all kind of music. Theirs is somewhat like ours in a way, parts of some of the songs. Some of the songs are not.

Well, now, do you think I can see that gentleman?

Yeah, Chris Fraser? I'll call him now. *(Davis makes a telephone call to Chris Fraser.)*

How about Henry? Do you think I can see him?

Yeah, I can tell him that you want to [...].

And Doc Guidry?

Well, he's, ...went on home in Louisiana.

And Joe Shelton?

I think he died [...]. He was over in Texas somewhere. Some of these people, they wouldn't know much anyway, you know. Chris Fraser'd probably know more about than anybody, maybe. [...music...] they just imagine things sometimes...who you're talkin' to, you know...Some of them might tell I wasn't ever the governor, you know. They wouldn't know who I was talkin' to, whether it's a friend or foe. Course, you want it straight, wherever it is.

And your son, James William Davis, he's in Newelton?

Newelton, yeah. It's nearly two hundred miles. ...Yoy wouldn't need to see anybody in Shreveport. I'm sure you can get all here that you can get there. You wouldn't get anythin', I mean, I've been gone from there so long. Anybody?

Well, your sisters, like Minnie and Dorothy. Aren't they in Shreveport?

Yeah. They woudn't know much, you know. They don't know much about business. Singin' and all that, they wouldn't know anything' about it.

Do you think I can talk with Mrs. Adams?

Uh, yes.

Is it a rest home near Shreveport?

It's in Shreveport, yeah. It's Virginia Rest Home. No, it's Virginia something. It's on Virginia Avenue. I wouldn't take much of her time, because she is nearly a hundred years old, you see.

How about these people? Paul Culpepper, Chance Roberts, Chet Steadman.

Well, Paul Culpepper died last year, and Chet Steadman last year.

How about Chance Roberts?

He died a few years before that.

Howard Clayton? From Jonesboro.

He died.

The owner of KWKH, W. K. Henderson?

He's been dead for years, yeah.

Does that station still exist?

Uh, yeah. But they have new people out there. They don't have any people at the...

Warren Pottinger?

Well, I dunno, he's...he's out in Texas. I don't know where he is now.

Tex Plain?

He's out in California. Some place, I don't know where.

The wife of Charles Mitchell?

She died.

So many people died. And Herschell Woodall?

He killed himself, shot himself.

Bill Harper, a fiddler?

He died.

Lyman McBride?

He died.

Mary White? A teacher?

Well, she died.

Wasco Clainer?

He's dead. He was the State senator. ...if you...I ran against him, he'd tell you I was a thief, you know. That's what he'd tell you.

Well, then, Chris Fraser, and, if possible, I'd like to see your son, James Davis, and Mrs. Adams in Shreveport, and Minnie and Dorothy in Shreveport, and Henry in Baton Rouge. So in Baton Rouge I can see Mr. Fraser and your brother Henry.

Huhum. Henry could tell you anythin' that they could tell you [...my...] in Shreveport, and would save your trip up there. But he'd know more about my business than they would, yeah. 'Cause he worked in the governor's office, you see. He was the head of the Commerce and Industry Department. Then he worked for the federal government, and after that he was in the Treasury Department. If you'd see

Fraser, yeah, he knows more people in the State than anybody in the State, I guess, Fraser. He was with me all the time in campaign life, and we are goin' this weekend, eh, Friday night. He's gonna drive me to New Orleans, and stay there a while. But if you see him and Henry, why, you would, . . . Miss Adams wouldn't tell you anythin'. I moved in there with 'em when I was married, you know. I'm more of a son than a son-in-law, you know, she's a kinda mother to me.

Doctor Robert G. Lee?

He died. Two years ago. Very famous speaker and preacher.

And A. C. Holly?

He died. He helped me a lot. He was the Mayor of Jonesboro.

Ah, yes, and Willie Strother? A professor of. . .

Yeah, [. . . .]. He died. Let's see, let me see the list. The list of people here ? Well, Allen Dees died. Prentis Dumas, he's down in somewhere Texas, but he's an invalid now. Buddy Jones died, Dizzy Hand died, Oscar Woods died, Leon Chappellear died, Buster Jones dead, all of them died. Ted Daffan, I don't know where he is. Tillman is in Texas. Stuart Hamblen in Clifornia [. . . .] where he is. [. . . .] Johnny Roberts, he's dead, Charles Mitchell's dead, J. E. Eastman, they were good. They were a quartet. He did, Wilson died, Goodman lives, Goodman lives up in the northern part of Kentucky. And Dottie Rambo, I'm sure she had to say here, to say about we here, that's just about all she can tell you [. . . .] to see her.

Oh, this is also from The Singin' News?

That's an article she put in there, you see. You see, she said, "Davis has been like a father to me". I started her in business, you see. [. . . .] to give Davis credit for discoverin' her song-writin' talents. That's all she could say, she and I had a few songs together, but she gives me credit for I told her to get on business. Now Dottie Rambo is in California. . . . *(Tape recorder is turned off.)*